Women in research - 19 September 2019, Central London

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Key themes

The day featured various speakers on inequalities in research careers, mostly centering on gender with many speakers coming from STEM subjects. Key themes which emerged from the day include:

1. The unfavourable conditions for women in research which hinder progression. Common discourse places responsibility on the woman to remedy her position (termed as "fixing the woman"), with mentoring/upskilling presented as the obvious solution. While mentoring schemes can be helpful, individualised approaches mask structural inequalities and a lack of institutional support.
2. These structural inequalities are intersectional, not only affecting women but BAME people, disabled people, those who are LGBTQ+, or from working class backgrounds. Any action needs to consider intersectionality.
3. The clear benefits of flexible working arrangements and sabbaticals for women who have taken maternity leave or have needed to take a career break for other reasons, and the importance of promoting a culture of flexibility and challenging presenteeism. The Daphne Jackson Trust presented case studies which highlight the benefits of its scheme to help women return to research after a career break.
4. Collaboration, networking and peer support are important. Women need to champion each other in research.
5. Collegiate and supportive behaviours need to be fostered and rewarded rather than individualistic models of advancement which do not benefit others

Examples of good practice

- A flexible working scheme which is 'Yes by default' rather than no by default
- Regular sabbatical terms, for example 3 months every 2 years, which are not affected by maternity leave
- Every module taught by two people, allowing for sabbaticals/flexible working
- Job sharing and job swaps
- Collectively challenging 'othering' behaviours. Some institutions provide 'Active Bystander' training to address bullying and bad behaviours
- Team mentoring, which does not only focus on individuals
- Specific schemes for female, BME, working-class academics

Summary of the day and key points

Ann Phoenix (UCL Institute of Education)

- Discussed inequalities in relation to funding and commitments
- There are more women in research, but they publish fewer papers and are less internationally mobile, less likely to collaborate with other academics
- More men apply for grants
- Women are often given crucial tasks that take time; promotions are often delayed. If women are rejected for a promotion they are less likely to apply again.
- There are very few female professors, and even fewer BME female professors (and they often are in the bottom tier)
- Men have the privilege of "carelessness" – there is extra labour for women and they are often doing pastoral care work
- Inequalities are often individualised and women are responsibilized. It becomes a question of 'fixing the woman' through upskilling and mentoring; these are useful but don't address the address the wider system
- Academic structures, policies and posts: strategic posts on equality are not well resourced or appointed
- Equality/diversity as "nonperformative" (Sara Ahmed); complaints are ostracised, and approaches to equality/diversity are often formulaic; women often find themselves to be 'bodies out of place' (Puwar 2004)
- "Critical sexism" - some academics claim they are already critical and progressive while still perpetuating sexist behaviour and structures – this makes challenges more difficult
- Power relations are key – meaning that it is important to refuse silencing and challenge bad behaviour collectively.
- It is important to think of systems and structures through the lenses of feminism, intersectionality, anti-racism, decolonising
- Collaboration is important, wide consultations about proposals, resubmitting unsuccessful ideas; negotiating times and money.
- Airing/sharing ideas (people are afraid of sharing ideas because of IP issues) – always produces better work
- It's important to learn to say no
- It's important to continue discussions about research, and network in a meaningful way
- Mentoring can be particularly useful when it's across teams (then it's not individualised)

Katie Perry (Daphne Jackson Trust)

- Talks about the trust and how they support female researchers returning from career breaks
- Talks about the importance of Heads of School and others in leadership positions being engaged

Seralynne Vann (Wellcome Trust Senior Research Fellow)

- Discusses mobility and the idea that if you don't move institutions you're seen as parochial
- There's a lack of understanding of academic pathways/options in relation to involvement in research projects
- There are particular challenges in relation to part-time studying and caring support
- Discusses the importance of changing the research culture, showing people/institutions how to be better; rewarding/recognising people and institutions for being better
- Discusses the importance of being a generous researcher/colleague - not everyone has to be a leader, and in general, the importance of making academia a nicer place to work
- Specific funding schemes for women with a particular focus on those from BME/low socio economic background
- Promotion/communication of schemes is important – not only the policies themselves
- There should be yes as a default to flexible working requests rather than no as a default
- Discussion: mobility for its own sake is often fetishized

Claudia Giradone (University of Essex)

- Discusses her career as a banking/finance academic (which is a male dominated field), also mentions experiences around going to meetings where you're the only woman
- Discusses the importance of supportive colleagues and giving time to build networks
- Mentions specific ideas that could be useful for BCU:
    - Sabbatical terms – 3 months once every 2 years
    - Having each module taught by 2 people
    - Making the case that flexibility is a good thing
    - Creating roles specifically for women
    - Having outside people on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committees
    - Job shadowing/job swaps

Afternoon panel discussion: Discussing strategies for the advancement and progression of women in research

Louise Bright (University of South Wales)

- Says that the discussion is often about whether it's about "fixing the woman" or if it's about systemic problems
- Mentions the importance of finding advocates, but also being an advocate
- We need to reflect on how the language we use to discuss academic merit and excellence is often gendered; men tend to frame things in terms of individual rather than collective achievement

- Rather than it being about the woman who is lacking, there needs to be more scrutiny of recruitment and promotion panels and if they have enough awareness and skills around gender issues

Simonetta Manfredi (Oxford Brookes University)

- What do we value and who decides what we value in research? This is often gendered
- What do we mean by academic merit?
- There is a perception that women aren't as confident in assessing their suitability for jobs and promotions. There is also a perception that men are more 'ideas based' than women and are therefore more likely to get jobs. Women don't need fixing, it is the situation that does.

Tom Welton (Imperial College London)

- The discussion might be better framed in terms of a division between those for whom the system works, and those who are "other"
- Poor behaviours are accepted and even encouraged, particularly bullying
- In Chemistry, bullying is a major contributor to the leaky pipeline problem
- Peer reviewing can be much more encouraging, particularly for ECRs
- Questions around REF and whether it will make things better

Closing remarks

Katie Perry (Daphne Jackson Trust)

- What is success? For the Daphne Jackson Trust, success for their fellows is if they're in their first choice of career; makes the point that we're losing a lot of early career researchers (although alternative careers are important too)
- Using evidence rather than anecdote is key, and working from an evidence base
- Learning to say no
- Behaviours – is this a gender issue or an issue about behaviours?
- Put energy into the things that you can control and the things you can influence
- Accountability – link things to accountability and possibly to funding
- Champion women and be a role model