

# 19. Gender and academic careers in Ireland: towards greater gender equality

**Janine Bosak and Pat O'Connor**

---

## SETTING THE SCENE

Dr Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, a botanist, filed a discrimination lawsuit against her employer, the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway (in 2022 renamed to University of Galway) in 2009. Over time, the university had not promoted her from the position of Lecturer to Senior Lecturer.<sup>1</sup> In the 2008/09 competitive promotional round to senior lectureship, she was one of 47 applicants (32 men and 15 women). Of the 23 men and seven women shortlisted, 16 men and only one woman were recommended for promotion to Senior Lecturer. She was one of the seven shortlisted female applicants but was not recommended for promotion.

Dr Sheehy Skeffington initiated a lawsuit against her employer of 34 years and won the landmark case in 2014, with the Equality Tribunal finding NUI Galway guilty of direct and indirect discrimination against her in respect of promotion.

## BACKGROUND TO GENDER (IN)EQUALITY IN IRISH HEIs (HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES)

Dr Micheline Sheehy Skeffington was motivated to take her case to the Equality Tribunal on her own behalf and to highlight the situation both of other female academics discriminated against in that Senior Lecturer competition and of women in academia more generally.

Ireland is a small country (population 5.1 million), dominated, up to the 1990s, by the institutional Roman Catholic Church, with a strong tradition of male dominance of positions of public power. This was reflected in the persistence of the marriage bar (a ban on married women continuing in paid employment in the public sector) until 1973. Although it did not apply to the

universities, the social expectation was that women would retire on marriage, evident in separate and higher pay scales for married men up to 1973.

Ireland moved from an 'elite' system of higher education (HE) in the 1960s (with 5 per cent of the age cohort entering HE), via a 'mass' one in the 1980s (15 per cent), to one where over three-fifths of young adults now enter HE, with girls' participation increasing dramatically over the period.

The problem of gender inequality at staff level in Irish academia was recognised early on. In 1985, at the instigation of the then Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, a report showed that in 1975/76 women made up less than 5 per cent of those at full professorial level. In 2000 women still made up only 7.5 per cent of those at that level, one of the lowest in the European Union (EU), and compared with 23.9 per cent in Portugal, 25.5 per cent in Turkey and 22.7 per cent in the United States.

Following the high-profile case of *Sheehy Skeffington v. National University of Ireland Galway*, a report undertaken for NUI Galway recommended that the flexible cascade model be used in promotions – that is, that the proportion of women promoted should reflect the proportion in the level below (i.e. a soft quota). The *Report of the Expert Group, HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* concluded that 'radical action' was needed (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2016, p. 9), without which they could not guarantee that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) would 'ever be free of gender inequality' (p. 9). Given the under-representation of women in senior positions, and its implications for membership of promotion boards, it recommended a professorial quota of 40 per cent women by 2024. To facilitate this, the Senior Leadership Initiative was launched in 2017, involving the creation of 45 new and additional senior academic posts over a three-year period in areas where women were under-represented. Athena SWAN, a gender equality charter, was introduced in 2015.

The research funding agencies took action to tackle discrimination. The Irish Research Council's 'gender blinding' of funding applications and references in 2014 increased women's success rate substantially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) postdoctoral awards (from 35 per cent in 2013 to 57 per cent in 2017). Science Foundation Ireland's Starting Investigator Research Grant (SIRG) Programme incentivized HEIs to nominate excellent female candidates by allowing them to increase the number of candidates that could be submitted per institution from the original six to 12, provided no more than six of these were men. This increased the proportion of women applicants from 23 per cent in 2013 to 47 per cent in 2015 and their success rates from 27 per cent in 2013 to 50 per cent in 2015. These initiatives show the importance of moving beyond an approach which focuses on 'fixing the women'.

At an international level, gender equality is seen as a human right; there is an overall global trend towards greater gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2019). Achieving gender equality is central to the fulfilment of the Council of Europe's mission in terms of safeguarding human rights, upholding democracy and preserving the rule of law and implies equal access to resources for women and men as well as the equal distribution of such resources between them (Council of Europe, 2018). In the EU, legal and policy frameworks and other initiatives have aimed to reduce gender inequalities in academia and research institutions (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). Yet, the 'normal' structures, criteria and procedures and a wide range of practices value men and undervalue women, hence perpetuating gender inequality (O'Connor, 2020b).

For female academics, Irish academia has often been a difficult arena. This has varied across time and place. Thus, for example, in the University of Limerick, the first woman (the 2nd author of this chapter) was appointed in 1997 at full professorial level and the proportion of women at that level rose to 34 per cent by 2012 there (compared to 12 per cent in NUI Galway). Thus, in the same small country, with the same stereotypes and broadly similar career paths, experiences have varied. NUI Galway has been recognised as underperforming in this area since 2013 (O'Connor and Irvine, 2020).

Nationally, the proportion of women at full professorial level, while still low (30 per cent: HEA, 2021), is now slightly above the EU (26.2 per cent: European Commission and Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2021), broadly similar to Australia (30 per cent) and somewhat behind the United States (33 per cent).

## DR SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON'S STORY AND THE VOICES OF OTHER IRISH FEMALE ACADEMICS

Dr Sheehy Skeffington started her role as college lecturer at NUI Galway in 1990. She worked in the School of Botany for 34 years, during which time she applied for promotion to Senior Lecturer four times – the 2008/09 promotional round being the one that led to the landmark discrimination case.

I heard in May 2009 that I had been unsuccessful. I discovered that 16 men had been promoted and only one woman. It seemed to me that something was wrong. It seemed obvious to me then that I should question it. I appealed to the college first. During that process I was advised to lodge an appeal with the Equality Tribunal. (*The Irish Times*, 2014)

The Equality Tribunal established not only that the entire interview process was flawed (e.g. lack of interviewer training and agreed marking scheme, no questions agreed in advance of interview, no individual marks retained,

external interviewer's suggestions ignored), but also that ineligible applicants made the shortlist, with one of these even promoted to Senior Lecturer (DEC-E2014-078, 2014). Applicants applying for promotion were assessed on three criteria (teaching, research and service), with minimum requirements for each criterion. These minimum requirements, however, were ignored for some of the successful candidates, all of whom were men, whereas the only successful woman more than met the minimum criteria (DEC-E2014-078, 2014). Worse, Dr Sheehy Skeffington, who met the minimum criteria for teaching, received lower scores than three male candidates who did not meet those minimum criteria. The highest-ranking male candidate also did not hold a PhD whereas all the female applicants did. The Equality Tribunal concluded that Dr Sheehy Skeffington was directly discriminated against regarding promotion to Senior Lecturer.

The Equality Tribunal also held that Dr Sheehy Skeffington was indirectly discriminated against on the basis of caring responsibilities. Applicants could list periods of protected leave (e.g. maternity leave). All male applicants and three out of the seven female shortlisted candidates left this section blank, one of these being the highest-ranked woman. In contrast, the other women, including Dr Sheehy Skeffington, referred to different types of leave including maternity leave, caring leave, adoptive leave and job-sharing. While this recognition of leave had a legitimate purpose, it appeared to have contributed to discrimination according to the Equality Officer:

I cannot escape the conclusion that the majority of female applicants drawing attention to their caring responsibilities outside the workplace disadvantaged them against the male applicants.

Dr Sheehy Skeffington is the granddaughter of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who was one of Ireland's most well-known suffragettes and Irish nationalists, founding the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908 to fight for women's voting rights, and a founding member of the Irish Women's Workers Union.

The success of me winning this case was an immediate thing, but until equality is achieved nationally I still won't have done this on behalf of other women. I'm a feminist. I come from a family of feminists. I had to take this case to honour them all.

Dr Sheehy Skeffington won her case and was awarded EUR 70,000, which she gave to the other five women who were shortlisted but not promoted in the 2008/09 competition. Four of these took a case to the High Court (the fifth went to the Labour Court and won). A settlement was made by NUI Galway with the four in 2018.

The problems in NUI Galway are extreme but not unique. A national online survey (involving 4,835 respondents: HEA, 2016) found that men were less likely than women to think that gender inequality existed in Irish HE and less likely to think it was very important. Both men and women referred to a masculine organisational culture in open comments:

The culture in HE tends to be macho and misogynistic. There are a small number of very capable, high achieving women who hold senior positions within the HE organisation. This acts to effectively mask the misogyny and sexism which pervades all layers of the organisation. (Man, academic in management position: HEA, 2016, p. 55)

A woman professor in senior management spelt out the homosocial culture in academia:

Most of the men I work with, the bottom line is that they would be much more comfortable to be working with men. They vaguely put up with you, accept that you have a right to be there, but if it was up to themselves, they are more comfortable around men. This is not a generational thing. Those most uncomfortable are seriously younger. (Woman, academic in management position: O'Connor, 2020b, p. 150)

Criteria for progression are often vague with tautological references to excellence, without any indication as to what standards will be used to assess it. Standards can be defined by the board on the day. So, after reading the CVs, if the board wants to appoint A, who has only 20 publications, over B, who has 40, they can define excellence as 20-plus publications, thereby benefiting A and penalising B (O'Connor and Barnard, 2021). Some respondents referred to a lack of transparency in the decision-making processes and to the importance of the 'old boys club' (HEA, 2016, p. 51) and the way informal relationships between men affect outcomes:

My experience is that the written rules, the formal policies etc. are fine – it is the underlying bias in the norms, values and the way decisions are made and preferment is exercised that is the problem. (Woman, academic: HEA, 2016, p. 66)

The disproportionate allocation of teaching, course administration and pastoral care to women was also referred to by respondents in an Irish senior management study (O'Connor, 2014; 2015): activities which are not valued for promotion, but which are seen as 'natural' for women. As one of these senior managers saw it, teaching had become a feminised, invisible and undervalued activity, with most undergraduate course directorships – 'the most onerous job in the university' (O'Connor, 2020b, p. 149) – done by women.

Although men were most likely either to deny the existence of gender inequality or to think in terms of stereotypical gender attributes, both men and women in senior management positions highlighted subtle indicators of gender inequality, but only a small minority of them were actually willing to take action. A senior academic manager appointed the first three women academics in his own area:

against quite a bit of resistance from some of my male colleagues ... I felt we needed a proper gender balance. 2/3rds of the undergraduates in that area were women. I felt it was rather odd that they were taught exclusively by male academics. My job was to make sure that people did not make decisions biased against them. (Man, academic in management position: O'Connor, 2020b, p. 151)

Male academics referred to 'paying forward' by doing 'favours' (i.e., unpaid work) for those in a predominantly male hierarchy in the expectation of sponsorship in promotional contexts:

If you've nobody on the other side of the table fighting your case, you've no chance ... You arrange [that] ..., through [favours], you know .... And you do it not just once, you might do it fifty times. So, when your application [for promotion] goes in you'd expect them to support you. (Man, academic: O'Connor and Barnard, 2020b, p. 60)

Structures designed by men for men have difficulty dealing with female embodiment such as reflected in maternity leave. Insofar as such structures valorise a long-hours culture, they create difficulties as regards childcare (which is disproportionately assigned to women), evident in conflict for women between paid work and childcare. However, one woman wryly reflected that it had been successfully managed in her previous academic job outside Ireland. Men who had worked outside Irish academia were also more likely to see women's under-representation as a systemic problem, rather than seeing women themselves as the 'problem'.

Irish academia is changing. This is reflected in women's slow but steady progress in the professoriate and in the fact that whereas no woman had ever headed up an Irish public university, by 2022 six of the (now) 12 public universities have women in that position, that is, as President/Rector.

## REFLECTIONS AND OUTLOOK

Although various factors (O'Connor, 2020b) contribute to the gender imbalance in professorial and senior leadership positions, including gender differences in goals, interests and gender role self-concept (Bosak and Sczesny, 2008), there is substantial evidence that *gender discrimination* contributes

to such continued gender inequality (Heilman et al., 2015), as illustrated by the case of Dr Sheehy Skeffington. *Stereotypes* can make it seem that women do not have what it takes for leadership roles and thus act as a potent barrier to women's upward career advancement. Such stereotypes are particularly likely to be elicited in the presence of *ambiguity*, when criteria lack clarity or procedures lack transparency. Gender stereotypes ascribe greater communion (e.g., kindness, compassion) to women and greater agency (e.g. assertiveness, competitiveness) to men (Eagly et al., 2020). Given that predominantly agentic qualities are associated with leadership success, women tend to be disadvantaged as they appear less qualified than men (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

The impact of gender stereotypes on selection decisions is increased when there is such *ambiguity* involving criteria and procedures for comparing applicants (Heilman et al., 2015). This was evident in Dr Sheehy Skeffington's case, with no agreed marking scheme or interview questions. Respondents from the national online survey also highlighted the vagueness of criteria for promotion, opening the decision-making process to manipulation and gender bias. The content of letters of recommendation are also problematic, describing women as more communal and less agentic than men, with communal attributes being negatively associated with hiring decisions in academia (Madera et al., 2009).

Gender stereotypes also encourage decision-makers to use different standards in judging female and male applicants. Based on stereotypical expectations that women might not be as competent and agentic as men, particularly in male-dominated areas, a *double standard* can exist regarding task competence, so that women must perform better than men to be seen as equally competent (Bosak and Sczesny, 2011; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Gender bias appears to have played a very strong role in the 2008/09 promotional round at NUI Galway where Dr Sheehy Skeffington was held to such high standards that, for service and teaching, she received lower scores than a male candidate with a lesser service record and male candidates who did not even meet the minimum teaching criteria. Research finds that men are often considered more competent and hireable than equally qualified and high-performing women (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). In the NUI Galway promotional round the highest-ranking male applicant was the only person without a PhD.

Stereotypical beliefs about women's greater communion in combination with an organisational culture which is not friendly to women contribute to *gendered career pathways*, with female academics channelled into roles related to pastoral care, teaching and service roles, which are less advantageous to career progression than elite and masculinised research pathways (O'Connor, 2020a). Moreover, women's caring responsibilities outside of work violate academia's preference for ideal workers. This might lead women to conceal these responsibilities. The concept of the *ideal worker* stems from Acker (1990), who argued that organisations believe workers to be 'disembod-

ied' and unencumbered by domestic responsibilities and other caring responsibilities. Such norms and expectations involving workers being fully committed to their job and working long hours are particularly consequential for women, who tend to have greater caring responsibilities, with mothers, for example, believed to be lower in job commitment, achievement striving, dependability and competence (e.g. Heilman and Okimoto, 2008). Similarly, Dr Sheehy Skeffington and the other three female academics who indicated caring leave in their applications were disadvantaged by providing this information in the promotional process.

To address gender discrimination and support women's careers, *gender quotas* might be introduced to increase the number of women in professorial roles; this increase might lead to a change in stereotypes about women, men and leaders over time (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Kulich and Bosak, 2019). Nevertheless, such measures are often met with opposition not only from non-beneficiaries but also from women themselves, for fear of promoting the belief that beneficiaries are not sufficiently qualified or able to succeed on their own (Heilman et al., 2015). Moreover, with many female academics like Dr Sheehy Skeffington likely to lack male sponsorship (O'Connor and Barnard, 2021; Parsons and O'Connor, 2023), there might be an expectation that those women promoted to senior positions would help improve career advancement opportunities for other women. This expectation might be false, as some senior women, labelled *Queen Bees*, adjust to the masculine organisational culture and distance themselves from more junior women, with this behaviour believed to be a response to gender discrimination and identity threat (Derks et al., 2016). There was no evidence of this among the women in the Irish senior management study (O'Connor, 2015).

In conclusion, the case of Dr Sheehy Skeffington shows that the culture of HE in Ireland is not gender neutral and that structural and cultural barriers and discrimination against women who aspire to professorial and senior management roles in universities exist. Yet, her landmark case has paved the way for change in Irish academia towards greater gender equality over the years (O'Connor and Irvine, 2020), as evident, for example, from the increase of women in professorial positions from 5 per cent in 1975/76 to 30 per cent in 2021, even surpassing the European average of 26 per cent. The HEA is experimenting with a range of different initiatives to create greater gender equality in HEIs, such as Athena SWAN, the setting of ambitious gender targets for professorial roles and women-only professorships. The jury is still out on the success of these organisational and cultural change initiatives and their long-term effects.

## BOX 19.1 STOP AND THINK

1. What do you see as the key contributors to gender imbalance at professorial and senior management level? Which might be specific to Ireland? What data on other countries would you need to check that out?
2. What contribution to gender imbalance and lack of career progress by women is made by a masculine organisational culture? What can universities do to change this?
3. Think about the initiatives to achieve greater gender equality in Ireland: Which ones do you think will achieve the greatest change and why? Which ones will be controversial and why? Can you think of other initiatives?

## NOTE

1. The Irish system, like the UK system, consists of four main positions, arranged hierarchically: Lecturer; Senior Lecturer; Associate Professor; Full Professor.

## REFERENCES

- Acker, J. 1990. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4(2): 139–158.
- Bosak, J., and Sczesny, S. 2008. Am I the right candidate? Self-ascribed fit of women and men to a leadership position. *Sex Roles*, 58(9–10): 682–688.
- Bosak, J., and Sczesny, S. 2011. Gender bias in leader selection? Evidence from a hiring simulation study. *Sex Roles*, 65(3–4): 234–242.
- Council of Europe. 2018. *Gender equality strategy 2018–2023*. <https://rm.coe.int/prems-093618-gbr-gender-equality-strategy-2023-web-a5/16808b47e1>.
- DEC-E2014-078. 2014. *Sheehy Skeffington v National University of Ireland Galway*. <https://www.workplacerelements.ie/en/cases/2014/november/dec-e2014-078.html>.
- Derks, B., Van Laar, C., and Ellemers, N. 2016. The queen bee phenomenon: Why women leaders distance themselves from junior women. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3): 456–469.
- Eagly, A. H., and Karau, S. J. 2002. Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3): 573–598.
- Eagly, A. H., Nater, C., Miller, D. I., Kaufmann, M., and Sczesny, S. 2020. Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018. *American Psychologist*, 75(3): 301–315.
- European Commission and Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. 2021. *She Figures 2021: gender in research innovation: statistics and indicators*. Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2021. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/06090>.
- European Institute for Gender Equality. 2016. *Integrating gender equality into academia and research organisations: Analytical paper*. <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/integrating-gender-equality-academia-and-research-organisations-analytical-paper>.

- Heilman, M. E., Manzi, F., and Braun, S. 2015. Presumed incompetent: Perceived lack of fit and gender bias in recruitment and selection. In A. M. Broadbridge and S. L. Fielden (Eds), *Handbook of Gendered Careers in Management: Getting In, Getting On, Getting Out*: 90–104. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Heilman, M. E., and Okimoto, T. G. 2008. Motherhood: A potential source of bias in employment decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1): 189–198.
- Higher Education Authority (HEA). 2016. *Report of the Expert Group, HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions*. <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-National-Review-of-Gender-Equality-in-Irish-HigherEducation-Institutions.pdf>.
- Higher Education Authority (HEA). 2021. *Higher education institutional staff profiles by sex and gender*. 31 December 2021. <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/statistics/higher-education-institutional-staff-profiles-by-sex-and-gender/>
- Kulich, C., and Bosak, J. 2019. The persistence of gender inequality in leadership: Still a long way to go? In K. Gangl and E. Kirchler (Eds), *A Research Agenda for Economic Psychology*: 139–153. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Madera, J. M., Hebl, M. R., and Martin, R. C. 2009. Gender and letters of recommendation for academia: Agentic and communal differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(6): 1591–1599.
- Moss-Racusin, C. A., Dovidio, J. F., Brescoll, V. L., Graham, M. J., and Handelsman, J. 2012. Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(41): 16474–16479.
- O'Connor, P. 2014. *Management and Gender in Higher Education*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- O'Connor, P. 2015. Good jobs – but places for women? *Gender and Education*, 27(3): 304–319.
- O'Connor, P. 2020a. Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in male-dominated higher educational organizations? A feminist institutional perspective. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 45(2): 207–228.
- O'Connor, P. 2020b. Creating gendered change in Irish higher education: Is managerial leadership up to the task? *Irish Educational Studies*, 39(2): 139–155.
- O'Connor, P., and Barnard, S. 2021. Problematising excellence as a legitimating discourse. In P. O'Connor and K. White (Eds), *Gender, Power and Higher Education in a Globalised World*: 47–69. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Connor, P., and Irvine, G. 2020. Multi-level state interventions and gender equality in higher education institutions: The Irish case. *Administrative Sciences*, 10(4): 98.
- Parsons, C., and O'Connor, P. 2023. You've heard of mentorship in science, by what about sponsorship? *Nature*. 19 January. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00123-z>.
- The Irish Times*. 2014. Micheline Sheehy Skeffington: I'm from a family of feminists. I took this case to honour them. 6 December. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/micheline-sheehy-skeffington-i-m-from-a-family-of-feminists-i-took-this-case-to-honour-them-1.2027451>.
- van den Brink, M., and Benschop, Y. 2012. Gender practices in the construction of academic excellence: Sheep with five legs. *Organization*, 19(4): 507–524.
- World Economic Forum. 2019. *Mind the 100 year gap*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>.