

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0096

C7 | Denbigh 2

Chaired by Louise Morley

Wed 11 Dec 2019

14:15 - 16:15

1. Women Leaders in Finnish Universities: Doing/Undoing Gender?

Louise Morley<sup>1</sup>, Rebecca Lund<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom* <sup>2</sup>*University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway*

**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** Does increasing the representation of women leaders have an impact on current university gender regimes? While some women are flourishing as leaders in the global academy, many are subjecting leadership to critical scrutiny and disqualifying it as an unattractive career option involving compliance with the political economy of neoliberalism that often conflicts with feminist values and epistemologies. This paper is based on 10 interviews with women university leaders in Finland. Theoretically, it intersects feminist affect notions, gender performativity and neoliberalism. Areas of affective intensity that participants reported included: gendered authority, financialised performance cultures, conflict and unpopular decision-making, precarity, and ageism. We conclude that while there is substantial evidence of gender inequalities in higher education, and problematic restrictive gender binary categories, more attention should be paid to imagining and leading post-gender universities. The politics of representation i.e. counting more women into neoliberal universities should be replaced with a politics of vision.

**Paper: Rejected or Rejecting Women**

Does increasing the representation of women leaders have an impact on university gender regimes? Feminist scholarship has elaborated the gendered academy, first concerning the lack of women altogether (Dyhouse, 1996), later the absence of women in senior positions (Nielsen, 2016; Aiston & Jung, 2015; Morley, 2014; Husu, 2004; Bailyn, 2003); gendered epistemic hierarchies (Pereira 2017; Lund & Tienari 2018); gendered pay gaps (Barbezat & Hughes, 2005); sexual harassment (Donald, 2018; Tuominen, 2018); bullying and occupational stress (Alliance of Women in Academia, 2018), and intersections of gender with ethnicity, age, sexualities, and social class (Lund, 2018; Käyhkö, 2015; Hey, 2003). Ahmed (2012) suggests that in naming the problem, you become the problem. It seems that academic women are constructed as a problematic site, whose speech acts create gendered inequalities by naming them. In this paper, we interrogate how women leaders in Finland are leading universities, and whether this includes undoing gender.

The relationship between gender and higher education leadership is complex and contradictory. On the one hand, the lack of senior women leaders is discriminatory (Burkinshaw, 2015; Morley, 2013). On the other hand, leadership itself is not an object of desire for many women. It is often perceived as the implementation of an assemblage of globally circulating neoliberal policy measures and cultural regimes that privilege performance, price and profit. This reading positions leadership as a pre-determined script involving compliance with a political economy that conflicts with feminist value systems and epistemologies, while remaining associated with particular types of masculinities and masculinised authority (Blackmore, 2017; Morley, 2014).

This paper is based on 10 interviews with women university leaders in Finnish universities. Our sample comprised research directors, heads of department, deans and a vice-president. Eight were full professors, aged from 40-65, based in 5 Finnish universities, with disciplinary backgrounds in humanities, social sciences, business and technology. Women were asked about their interpretations, approaches, aspirations and perceptions of senior leadership, engaging critically with what and how women are being asked to lead. The Finnish project builds on findings from Morley and Crossouard's (2016) research in South Asia. Theoretically, both projects engage with feminist affect theory (Ahmed, 2010), Butler's gender performativity (1990), and neoliberalism in the prestige economy of the global academy (Lund, 2018; Morley, 2018).

A key finding from both projects is that women are being rejected or disqualified from senior leadership through discriminatory recruitment, selection and promotion procedures, gendered career pathways and exclusionary networks and practices in women-unfriendly institutions. However, many women were also refusing, resisting or dismissing senior leadership and making strategic decisions not to apply for positions which they evaluated as onerous and undesirable. While women leaders in Finland enjoyed the creative and developmental aspects of leadership, they also outlined areas of challenge and affective intensity that included: gendered authority, performativity, conflict, unpopular decision-making, and ageism and the other embarrassed *etc*s (Butler, 1990).

### **Pleasures and Tensions, Love and Lack**

Several participants in Finland reported intense pleasure in leadership - enabling, facilitating recognising and including their colleagues. However, narratives often articulated lack - of resources in austerity cultures, transparency in decision-making, formal support, training, and development, work-life balance and control and power/influence. The cumulative lacks led to an absence of desire for more senior leadership, with lack of research time a frequent lament. Tensions included interest representation and cognitive and affective dissonance between their own values and those that they were forced to enact.

Only one participant identified as lesbian, and our data were saturated in heteronormative and gender-binaried metaphors and exemplars- especially of the morality of care and conventional life choices. Leadership was often equated with care, involving essentialised mothering skills. Those who avoided their turn-taking were constructed as draft-dodgers! Work-life balance was associated predominantly for those with nuclear families, and childfree women were characterised by some as having an unfair career advantage. Contradictorily, reproductively 'fertile' women were represented as a risk. Ageism and sexism intersected to dismiss women as always being the wrong age:

*Women of a certain age... of the fertile age are not necessarily recruited* (Head of Discipline).

Young women were seen to sometimes lack confidence and career capital, but to possess potential and ambition that had to be nurtured- so long as their bodies did not disrupt their progress. Older women navigated a path between being wise mentors and date-expired 'bedblockers' who needed to disguise their age by surrounding themselves with youth- a potentially sexualising problematic:

*A retired colleague of mine ... she told that I know a way how you stay visible. And one way is to have always beautiful young doctoral students around you (Dean)*

We noticed methodological tensions including leadership performativity and how safe participants felt disclosing doubts and discomfort in cultures of measurement and precarity. In the context of the audit culture, it is feasible that some were driven to perform confidence, conformity, and conventionality. We acknowledge that Finland is discursively positioned as a promised land of gender equality, and, as in many of the Nordic countries, the state and its public sector employers are visioned and experienced as benign, supportive and pro-citizen (Morley et al., 2018; Widerberg 2014). This self-understanding and positioning of the state and public sector may temper critique. Finally, several expressed that they had themselves transcended/ overcome gendered structures; and thus, struggles for gender equality were for other, often more junior women – particularly in relation to overcoming self-doubt and claiming intellectual and leadership authority.

### **Making a Difference to Difference**

We argue that while there have been numerous studies on gender inequalities in higher education, and restrictive gender binary categories have been problematised, scant attention has been paid to what might constitute a post-gender university. How do we disentangle analysis, responsibilities, skills, dispositions, relationships from gendered binaries and hierarchies, and how do we avoid gender without feminism? How can we undo the restrictive norms of gender and sexualities in a context of the new post-binary gender politics? The politics of representation i.e. counting more women into neoliberal universities, should be replaced with a politics of vision.