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Giving voice to Women in Leadership

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

This document reports on the combined primary and secondary findings of research and consultation of three partner institutions involved with the Women in Leadership pillar of the project Social Meaning Impact through Lifelong learning universities in Europe (SMILE). The partner organisations are Università degli Studi di Cagliari in Italy, the Applied Social Research Agency NOTUS in Spain, and Maynooth University in the Republic of Ireland.

The main purpose of the SMILE Women in Leadership strand is to develop and deliver a continuous professional development (CDP) programme that addresses barriers and challenges women working in higher education face. The first phase in this process was to review literature and policy in the area and to gather primary findings from those impacted by the phenomenon. This ensures that the continuing work of SMILE is evidence-based and in line with EU policy developments.

1.1 The wider context of gender-based inequality in Higher Education

Gender is situated as part of enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in access and participation to leadership positions in higher education, intersecting with other areas of inequalities including class, ethnicity, age and disability. The gendered experience in higher education has been grounded in a longstanding culture of carelessness in education, emerging from Cartesian rationalism and Western scientific knowledge that has been exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism in an increasingly volatile context of global capitalism (Lynch et al. 2012). It is our assertion that patriarchy and capitalism are interdependent and that the 'lean in' politics of liberal feminism can obscure the ongoing inequalities that many women experience. More women head up homeless families across Europe (Mayock & Bretherton, 2015), more women have become unemployed because of Covid19 (Zarrilli & Luomaranta, 2021) and a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence is now well documented. Since the onset of the Covid19 pandemic, many women in academia have been lumbered with disproportionate levels of the 'housekeeping of the university' (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2021).

These deep structural aspects of gendered experiences are deeply connected to care issues. Those doing care work in our society are ascribed a lower status, lower pay with more precarious working conditions. This is increasingly evident in a casualised labour market where conditions of employment for educators and graduates are becoming

increasingly precarious (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2019). Given the predominance of women in caring professions including education and the moral imperative on women to do care work (O'Brien, 2007), women face unique challenges combining their professional role and personal lives (Devine et al. 2011; Lynch et al., 2012). This is particularly pertinent for women who are significantly less likely to be care-free than men, regardless of their age or status (Acker and Dillabough, 2007; Pettinger et al. 2006).

For women in higher education especially at senior levels, "the ideal worker continues to be seen as one with no interests or responsibilities outside of work" which profoundly disadvantages women (Bailyn 2003: 141 cited in Grummell et al., 2009). Moreover, academic institutions have been found to be 'greedy' in terms of the level of commitment, work productivity and emotional engagement that they expect of employees (Currie et al. 2000, Franzway 2000). This is often placed in a 'care-less' frame, driven by individualism and 24-7 availability for work. More women tend to undertake both paid work and unpaid caring "acting as care's foot soldiers while men are care commanders" (Cantillon and Lynch, 2016: 15) and many women take temporary posts to accommodate their caring roles, which means they do the lower status day-to-day work of departments; work that is often not visible and receives little career recognition (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei 2003). Female education leaders described how they "felt that their childcare responsibilities had to remain invisible in their career; leading them to try to compete equally with those who had no caring responsibilities (Herman, 2015: 324). These expectations surrounding career paths and the denigration of care and gender also intersect with a complex range of other cultural and structural factors, including self-confidence creating powerful disincentives for females". (Grummell et al. 2011).

Research with people who are changing careers to move into education found they are primarily driven by intrinsic and altruistic motivations, with the primary concern cited in this shift identified as juggling "childcare, paid work and study" (Varadharajan et al., 2019: 9). The "frayed career paths" that Herman (2015: 334) described often follow "intermittent and iterative process that has different resonances and complexions at different life course stages much like the 'careers capes' that McKie et al. (2013) have proposed."

There has been some work in this area (which will be explored in more detail in section 2), however research approaches and policy debates on gender equality have substantially evolved over the past decades. In the 1980s, policy concerns in European and other Western countries were mainly placed on women's recruitment whilst the

research focus was placed on gendered socialisation – how from an early age individuals internalise 'feminine' and 'masculine' roles that shape their educational and professional choices. It was stressed that young women were discouraged from science by deeply rooted ideas about science being a 'masculine' field. Women were said to be less professionally ambitious than men and given to prioritise family over career. Overall, the explanations for the underrepresentation of women in research were sought outside research and research institutions (Stolte-Heiskanen, 1988).

The 1990s witnessed increasing criticism towards this approach. Whilst policy concern gradually moved from entry and qualification issues to retention and career advancement - research shifted from socialisation to organisational approaches (Cronin and Roger, 1999; Glover, 2001). Focus was increasingly placed on research organisations, their implicit norms and standards, institutional practices and power relations. This approach was further reinforced in the late 1990s as a result of two major 'scandals': the article by Wennerås and Wolf (1997), which provided evidence of sexism and nepotism in the peer-review system in Sweden, and the report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which publicly admitted that they had given lower pay and fewer resources to female scientists than to male scientists of equal seniority (MIT, 1999).

The European Technology Assessment Network, or ETAN report (Osborn et al., 2000) pleaded for an end to patronage and the 'old boys' network' in European academic institutions, the implementation of greater transparency and fairness in recruitment and assessment procedures and the modernisation of human resource management. The core message was that the excellence of research in Europe was being compromised by patronage, institutional discrimination and old-fashioned approaches to human resource management. Moreover, evidence from the US and Europe demonstrated that taken alone, affirmative action measures supporting women to pursue research careers are insufficient to make real change happen. Affirmative action measures for advancing women's research careers may be highly beneficial for individual researchers, but institutional constraints and implicit norms and values remain largely unchanged (Caprile et al., 2012).

This led to a shift in focus towards more systematic approaches to address the deeply embedded structures of inequality through the promotion of institutional transformation of research institutions. The US paved the way with the ADVANCE[1]

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[1] http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383 retrieved 15 July 2021.

programme funded by the National Science Foundation, which started in 2001. In the EU, support for structural change has been progressively embedded in Research and Innovation (R&I) policies. Since 2007, successive FP7/H2020 calls and projects have evolved from programmes supporting women researchers to programmes aiming at structural/institutional change in research and higher education organisations.[2]

Since the 2000s, policy debates have emphasised the need to combine organisational measures with efforts to overcome gender bias in knowledge production - enhance scientific excellence by mainstreaming sex and gender analysis in basic and applied research (Schiebinger, 2008). Gender mainstreaming in research should not only concern research organisations, but also the content of research: actions that improve the quality of the research process and methods, by increasing awareness of the need to consider whether a potential sex and/or gender dimension is relevant and, where relevant, by requesting the integration of sex/gender analysis into the design, implementation, evaluation and dissemination of the research. The shift from 'supply side' to 'demand side' approaches, i.e., from 'fixing the numbers of women' to 'fixing organisations', is thus further complemented by approaches aimed at 'fixing knowledge'. From this perspective, gender balance in decision-making is part of a broader process of institutional change in research organisations, which includes gender balance at all levels, but also changes in institutional norms, values, culture which impact the organisation as such and how knowledge is produced.

1.2 Gender Budgeting.

Gender inequalities in career advancement and leadership positions are also due to gender inequalities present in budget and grant assignment (Steinthorsdottir et al., 2013). As pointed out by these authors, managerial and financial decisions are not gender neutral. Gender budgeting can play a crucial role to correct inequalities. Gender budgeting is "a systemic approach that involves various instruments, techniques, and procedures to integrate the gender perspective into the overall budget process – from planning to reporting" (Oppi et al., 2021). A systemic approach includes assessing policies, managerial instruments and performance indicators and how they impact revenue raising and distribution of funding (Steinthorsdottir et al., 2013). As pointed out by Oppi et al. (2021), gender budgeting allows us to rethink traditional decision-making processes, applies to multiple phases in planning and

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[2] Although the concept remains basically unchanged, terminology has evolved from "structural change" to either "institutional change" or "institutional transformation".

reporting, allows measuring short- and long-term results in gender equality, and supports the promotion of organizations' awareness of the policies' consequences. Therefore, it is a key element both for informing and promoting more gender sensitive decision-making processes and adjusting norms and rules according to gender equality plans. In turn, more gender sensitive and balanced decision-making bodies are needed to introduce gender budgeting perspectives. In terms of diagnosis, Finnborg et al. (2013) shows how gender budgeting in European universities might detect issues such as that male-dominated STEM fields receive more funding than other female-dominated fields, an important issue in terms of career advancement and access to leadership positions. In terms of impact, Oppi et al. (2021) found that, for their case study of an Italian university, gender budgeting helped introduce regulation that would guarantee the less represented gender access to governance positions and better work-life balance of women. However, they also show how gender budgeting can have limitations to produce significant changes, especially if it is not fully integrated and institutionalised, developed, and interplayed with a broader strategy.

This opening section has provided an overview of some of the core themes relevant to women in Leadership and its social impact through lifelong learning.

Section 2 gives more detail on ongoing EU initiatives and tracks the mixed success from these initiatives.

Section 3 then uncovers some primary research carried out in an Irish setting to evidence some of the ongoing issues at play in real time and in the context of Covid 19.

Section 4 brings the emerging themes together making the case for further Continuous Professional Development.

Section 5 is a concluding section that also offers a sense of the philosophy and approach that should underpin Continuous Professional Development.

2. WOMEN'S INCORPORATION IN DECISION-MAKING BODIES: THE STATE OF PLAY IN EUROPE

To tackle the imbalances that have been illuminated thus far, and the unfair *status quo* this creates, different measures are taken to guarantee a certain percentage of women throughout each level of university and other educational structures, the bodies where important decisions are made. In this vein, gender balance in decision-making is one of the objectives of the European Research Area on gender equality and gender mainstreaming. *The European Commission and Helsinki Group on Gender in Research,* recommends the following actions/measures to apply at the national level:

a) Collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on the composition of professorship and management/leadership positions.

b) Promote gender balance in decision-making positions and professorships with adequate awareness raising and training.

c) Institutionalise gender equality plans as an assessment tool in the accreditation of universities and make them mandatory for universities and research organisations.

d) Institutionalise the proportion of women in grade A/professor positions as an assessment criterion in institutional evaluations (higher education accreditation, performance contracts with universities).

e) Set and implement guiding targets and/or quotas through legislation.

f) Evaluate regularly the implementation of quotas and/or targets.

g) Introduce incentives for institutions adopting pro-active measures and/or sanctions for noncompliance, as necessary.

The *Report on the Implementation of Targets: Follow-Up on the 2018 Guidance Recommendations* gives relevant insights regarding the advancements in women's incorporation in decision-making bodies in European countries. The report gives comprehensive statistical data and for a series of selected countries, it surveys the level of implementation of the seven recommendations of the European Commission and the Helsinki Group, mentioned above.

When studying the presence of women in decision-making bodies, we have three areas of interest: professor positions, heads of HEIs, and participation on boards. From 2007 to 2016, there was a general but slow increase of women in these areas across countries in the European Union. In the Member Countries and Associated Countries (including countries such as Norway, Turkey, or Israel) studied in the report, the average growth rate of the proportion of women has been 8.8% for Grade A positions, 6.8% for boards and 9.1% for heads of HEIs. In 2016, only seven countries out of the thirty-eight studied had more than

30% of Grade A positions occupied by women, with many being part of the EU-13. Concerning board members, only nine countries had more than 40% being women in 2017, and also only nine had more than 30% of heads of HEIs occupied by a woman.

All the recommendations except one have been implemented by at least 48% of countries. The higher advancement has been the collection and publication of sex-disaggregated data collection, with around 92% of countries surveyed completing this recommendation, followed by training and awareness-raising, with 80%. The high level of implementation of some gender equality recommendations contrasts with the low level of women representation. Indeed, the report mentions that countries surveyed with the largest number of recommendations' adoption do not have a high proportion of women in professor positions. For instance, Spain, which has adopted 86% of the recommendations, only has 8% of women as heads of HEIs. And what's more puzzling, even some countries with no National Action Plan and Strategy and that have not implemented any of the seven recommendations, such as Romania and Bulgaria, show a very high proportion of women in Grade A (professor) positions.

Compared to the high rates of data collection and training and awareness-raising, only 48% of the countries surveyed have included incentives and sanctions, and only four countries have measures on the institutionalisation of the proportion of women in Grade A position as an assessment criterion in institutional evaluations. In terms of actions completed, only 14.6% of the actions that have reached more than 50% completion explicitly address gender balance in research leadership positions and in decision-making. In this sense, another reason for the slow progress in incorporating women in decision-making might be the type of specific policies. Around 56% of the countries surveyed have targets and/or quotas legislation for university bodies such as rectorates, senates, boards, councils, etc. Also, these countries evaluate their implementation of these quotas and/or targets regularly. However, only Norway and Sweden have also targets for top positions, a key aspect for higher representation in decision-making bodies. In the case of EU-13, only Slovenia has implemented quotas. Maybe related to this, this country saw one of the big increases of 14% in the number of women on boards between 2006 and 2017, reaching up to 42% of women as board members. Another problem with quotas, especially when the nominations are made in a conservative political context, is that they can be used to nominate those who will not advocate to foster a gender equality agenda. Hence, on their own, they do not necessarily guarantee a significant progress towards more gender fair institutional and social transformation.

When studying good practices, Ireland, which has accomplished an increase of 22% in the presence of women on boards between 2007 and 2016, is praised in the report because of its comprehensive national gender equality policy. In 2020, all Irish HEIs have a gender

equality action plan in place, have clear targets for the proportion of staff by sex across all HEIs, and all HEIs have initiatives in place to address gender stereotyping. The success of Ireland can be traced back to an integrated national approach. This included the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality in its Higher Education Authority, creating a single and centralized state agency that monitors the progress and works closely with stakeholders to ensure the implementation. This authority requires the submission and publishes sex-disaggregated data on staff composition, including management; also, it monitors that all HEIs have a minimum of 40% of each gender on all key decision-making bodies; it requires a Gender Equality Action Plan for all HEIs with specific targets for recruitment and monitors progress; furthermore, the number of women in Professor A positions is used as a metric for performance contracts; and despite a lack of legislative quotas, the guiding targets in strategic documents are used as policy frameworks for the government, including that all boards must contain a minimum of 40% women and that all HEIs implement a flexible cascade model in the appointment of women to academic posts. Finally, in terms of incentives, the largest research funding agencies link funding to the Athena SWAN certification system, a charter created in 2015 to award HEIs implementing measures to improve gender equality. As will be discussed in section 3, a significant problem in an Irish context are high numbers of women in academia who are employed on casual, often precarious contracts therefore remain outside of structures such as Athena SWAN and institutional plans.

There were other interventions and measurements also. Since the European Commission's 2012 ERA Communication established gender equality as one of five priorities for achieving the objective of a common research area in Europe (European Commission, 2012), these policy areas have been progressively strengthened (European Commission, 2020). Three objectives were established to work with EU countries and foster institutional change:

- Gender equality in scientific careers
- Gender balance in decision-making
- Integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation

Under FP7 and H2020, the EC has taken a comprehensive approach to promoting national level reforms as well as fostering institutional change within research funding and performing organisations through the implementation of gender equality plans (GEPs) that aim to:
- Conduct impact assessments / audits of procedures and practices to identify gender bias.
- Implement innovative strategies to correct any bias.
- Set targets and monitor progress via indicators. (European Commission, 2012)

The Commission has funded various rounds of GEP implementation projects that provide a wealth of tools including various guidelines and resources for organisations seeking to develop a GEP.

With Horizon Europe, the Commission reaffirms its commitment to gender equality in research and innovation. The legal base sets gender equality as a crosscutting priority and introduces strengthened provisions:

- In particular, integrating the gender dimension into research and innovation content (i.e., sex and gender analysis) becomes a requirement by default across the whole programme unless its nonrelevance is duly justified (European Commission, 2021).
- The "gender dimension" means integrating intersectional sex and gender analysis in research design. It specifically includes: disability, ethnicity, and LGBTIQ+ dimensions.
- A new eligibility criterion will also be implemented: to access Horizon Europe funds: public bodies, research organisations and higher education establishments will be required to have a gender equality plan (GEP) in place, starting in 2022.

In 2020, the new ERA communication highlights that "despite evidence that balanced teams perform better, gender inequalities persist in Europe's R&I systems".[3] The *She Figures 2018* report presents overall improvement, but the pace remains too slow. Gender balance in PhD graduates (48% women) has nearly been reached. Yet, women remain significantly under-represented: only 33.4% of researchers in the EU are women, the share of women in Grade A positions in the Higher Education Sector (full professor and equivalent) reached just 24% for the EU in 2016 and the proportion of women heading higher education institutions in Europe was only 22% in 2017 (European Commission, 2019)

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[3] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A new ERA for Research and Innovation, (2020) Brussels, 30.9.2020 COM (2020)

2.1 Institutional change projects.

Institutional change projects have also been funded by the European Commission since 2010 through successive Framework Programmes. These projects provide direct support for universities and research organisations, operating as consortia, to engage in structural change through the implementation of tailored gender equality plans. This call has helped to create a wealth of useful resources as well as a community of practitioners, trainers and evaluators – which share results and good practices under the coordination of the Directorate -General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) (Pépin et al 2014).[4] Out of the 168 institutions involved in Horizon 2020 GEP projects, 130 institutions (78%) are implementing GEPs, while other partners have either an independent evaluating role or a consultancy or technical role (European Commission, 2020). In the 2020 call emphasis is placed on those countries in which the implementation of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research as documented by the ERA Progress Report (2018) is identified as 'slower', these are mainly widening countries.

The report of the Expert Group Interim Evaluation of Gender Equality as a cross-cutting issue in Horizon 2020 reinforced the relevance of a structural and institutional change approach. Shortcomings identified include:

- The reliability of Key Performance Indicators in this area[5] and gender flagging.
- Slow progress of improvement of gender balance in research teams.
- The need for gender expertise as well as gender balance.
- Lack of training for evaluators and researchers in addressing gender biases.
- The positive achievements include that the legal provisions for gender equality were secured (articles 14 and 16 of the framework programme).[6]

The Council Conclusions on Advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area developed in 2015 stated that EU Member States should "make institutional change a key element of their national policy framework on gender equality in R&I [Research and

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[4] Projects awarded under FP 7 included INTEGER, GENISLAB FESTA, STAGES GENOVATE, GENDERTIME, TRIGGER,' EGERA and GARCIA . To date 18 GEP projects have been funded through Horizon 2020 (excluding the 2020 call) (GENERA, LIBRA, PLOTINA, Baltic-Gender, SAGE, EQUAL-IST, TARGET, GEECCO, R-I-PEERS, CHANGE, SUPERA, GEARING-ROLES, Gender SMART, SPEAR, CALIPER, EQUAL4EUROPE, LETSGEPS, TARGETED MPI) with a total budget of Euro 43.9 million.

[5] KP 1[Percentage of women participants in Horizon 2020 projects], KP2 [Percentage of women project coordinators in Horizon 2020 projects, including Marie Sklowdowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) fellows European Research Council (ERC) principal investigators and scientific coordinators of other Horizon 2020 actions], KP 4 [Percentage of projects taking into account the gender dimension in R&I content]

[6] See https://ec.europa.eu/research/swafs/pdf/pub_gender_equality/interim_evaluation_gender_long_final.pdf retrieved 15 July 2021.

Innovation]" by developing national action plans or strategies at both the national and institutional levels. Incentives should be provided by Member States for research performing organisations (including universities) "to revise or develop gender mainstreaming strategies, gender equality plans including the gender dimension in R&I content and programmes and mobilise adequate resources to ensure their implementation." The Council Conclusions also highlight the need to strive for gender balance in leadership and decision-making positions and invites relevant authorities to establish guiding targets (i.e., quantitative objectives) to improve gender balance in decision-making bodies specifying 'leading scientific and administrative boards', 'recruitment and promotion committees' as well as 'evaluation panels'. National Action Plans were then developed in 2016 by Member States that included concrete actions to advance gender equality (Ferguson, 2021: 14).

The situation in the EU27 and associated countries remains heterogeneous, as the local cultural and political contexts have highly influenced the prioritisation of gender equality policies in research. The distinction made in 2009 (EC, 2009) of proactive countries, which promote and monitor gender equality in research and research funding with active policies and measures[7] and countries relatively inactive in this area, with few, if any, initiatives[8] has been generally maintained, despite the recognition that France made the transition from 'inactive' to 'proactive' (Lipinsky, 2014). The "Analytical paper" of the GEAR tool analyses differences across countries as a relevant aspect for GEP implementation in research organisations (EIGE, 2016).

The European Research Area (ERA) Roadmap has however been a catalyst for gender equality policy and measures in many EU countries, especially those where such measures had not been in place previously (SWG GRI 2018). Wroblewski (2018) shows that for 57% newer Member States and 25% of the older Member States, the ERA Roadmap was the first policy document dedicated to gender equality in research. However, Wroblewski (2020) also highlights that the process initiated by the ERA Roadmap 2015-2020 has only had limited success in increasing the engagement of some countries which have hitherto been fairly inactive regarding gender equality in R&I: either because they did not submit a National Allocation Plan (NAP) (Hungary, Slovakia) or did not address gender equality issues in their NAP (Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland). This also illustrates the need for a gender equality discourse within the ERA aimed at establishing a shared understanding of gender equality and common gender equality goals.

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[7] FI, NO, SE, DK, IS, AT, BE, DE, NL, CH, UK, IE, ES.

[8] BG, CY, CZ, EE, FR, GR, HR, HU, IL, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, SI, SK, TR.

National Allocation Plans (NAPs) also differ regarding the concept of gender equality used. Some countries address all three ERA gender equality objectives (careers; decision-making; integration of the gender dimension in research content and training), others only focus on one or two (Wroblewski, 2020: 1). Roughly a third of all NAPs contain a definition of gender equality, some make explicit reference to the ERA objectives (Austria, Cyprus, Greece and Slovenia), take more intersectional approach to gender (UK) or define gender as a social construct (Denmark) or a multidimensional construct (Finland) (ibid). The analysis also develops a typology of different countries:

- Countries with a comprehensive and consistent NAP and corresponding implementation (Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden)
- Countries with focused NAPs (Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal) which address two out of three ERA gender equality objectives.
- Countries with inconsistencies within the NAP or between the NAP and its implementation (Greece, Italy and UK)
- Countries with actionist NAPs (Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland) which do not contain a context analysis but formulate priorities and/or implement measures
- Countries with focused NAPs but without implementation (Croatia and Latvia)
- Countries without a NAP (Hungary and Slovakia) or with a NAP but without gender equality priorities (Bulgaria and Romania).

Several policies and measures have been identified as good practices. They are developed at the national and institutional levels (Research Funding Organisations and Research Performing Organisations).

Good practice policies and measures to increase female participation in R&I: (ERA gender equality objective 1)
National Level Initiatives: The Netherlands: "Talent Polices"; Austria: Gender Equality Goal In Output Oriented Budgeting"; Germany "Program for Women Professors"
Research Funding Organisations: Ireland, Irish Research Council: Gender Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2020*
Research Performing Organisations: Germany, Helmholtz Centres, "Recruitment Initiative"
Good practice policies and measures to support structural change: (ERA gender equality objective 2)
National Level Initiatives: Belgium: Wallonia-Brussels Federation: "Gender Mainstreaming Decree"; Austria: "Gender Equality – Performance Agreement with Universities"; Austria: "Diversitas – Diversity Management Award for Higher Education and Research Institutions"; Austria "Laura Bassi Centres of Excellence"
Research Funding Organisations: Germany: "Research-Oriented Standards on Gender Equality with Toolbox"; Ireland, Irish Research Council: Gender Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2020*
Research Performing Organisations: Belgium: University of Ghent, "Changing Election Rules"**
Good practice policies and measures to integrate the gender dimension into research content and teaching: (ERA gender equality objective 3)
National Level Initiatives: Germany: "Funding for Networking and Transfer"
Research Funding Organisations: Austria: "FEMTech Research Projects";
Research Performing Organisations: Belgium: Wallonia-Brussels Federation: "Inter-University Master's Degree in Gender Studies"

Table 1 – Good practice policies and measures Source Wroblewski, 2020.

Gender Equality Plan (GEP) uptake is largely consistent with the proactive/initiative policy distinction. The proportion of research performing organisations with GEPs varies greatly between countries ranging from under 20% in Slovakia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic to over 90% in Sweden, Germany and the UK (European Commission, 2019).

Despite the advances that have been outlined in this section, women continue to experience ongoing difficulties when seeking leadership roles within Higher Education. Gender quotas that guarantee a certain percentage of women are represented in the pool of candidates is a blunt instrument in tackling long historical processes of patriarchy that perpetuate a deep-seated privilege of men in the recruitment process (Lynch et al. 2021). As men internalize socially constructed concepts of masculinity, they often feel more entitled to top-managerial positions, a perspective supported by an environment where the opposite happens to women. Where laws are established, those responsible for recruitment are encouraged or obliged to directly hire women. However, there are gaps within Higher Education across Europe including in the implementation of policies. For instance, in Austria where at least 50% of the members of decision-making bodies must be women, in turn in Poland or Sweden they are strongly opposed.

3. THE ONGOING CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

Sections 1 and 2 reviewed literature and European wide initiatives that have been put in place to level the playing field and tracked progress. As section 2 highlighted, the Irish context is considered favourably. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2016) was an important first step in highlighting the gender inequality that existed at senior academic levels in HEIs and as in other jurisdictions has led to renewed focus on gender initiatives such as Athena SWAN, Aurora and Women in Science.

However, it is important to highlight the many ongoing challenges and the impacts these have on the lives of women working in academia. To do this, this section reports on primary research in the Irish context but equally contends that these are relevant themes across each European jurisdiction. Specifically, we focused on the many women who are working across a range of university departments and programmes who are employed on occasional/casual contracts that are often highly precarious. Many are only paid for the hours they teach, despite some working in the same institution for many years. These women, often the frontline in terms of student support, and teaching work often remain outside of the structures and initiatives such as Athena SWAN. This growth in unstable work is part of a growing casualisation of work across the globe and is a phenomenon that particularly impacts women (Jaffe, 2021). For critics, there is growing emphasis on the gap between this practice, and what the United Nations (UN, 2015) and International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2019) frame as a right to 'decent work' with the values, aspirations and practices of labour markets in late capitalism (Finnegan et al., 2019).

Some work has been done in this regard. Following pressure from Trade Unions the Irish government commissioned the '*Report to the Minister for Education and Skills of the Chairperson of the Expert group on Fixed-Term and Part-Time Employment in Lecturing in Third Level Education in Ireland'* (commonly known as the 'Cush' Report) which confirmed an over-reliance on precarious, zero-hours contracts for employing lecturing staff at many HEIs with as many as two-thirds of some lecturing staff not on full-time or permanent contracts in some institutions.

Compared to the Irish case, which can rightfully be considered as a good practice, the Italian case instead configures a rather slow process of approaching the achievement of full gender symmetry, especially as regards obtaining top positions, and the field of HE is not an exception, but unfortunately a well representative sector of the labour

market in general. It is true that for at least 15 years the entire system of public administration in Italy, particularly in the context of public universities and research institutions, has tried to build a regulatory framework within which to accelerate organisational changes oriented towards greater gender equality: for example, the process currently underway for the adoption of Gender Equality Plans in all Italian universities, also following the pressure generated by the aforementioned request by the European Commission to be equipped with them in order to access the funding of the Horizon and ERC Programs starting from 2022, has been inserted into a framework consistent with the direction traced at national level by Law 183/2010, which established the creation of the CUG (Guarantee Committees for equal opportunities) in every university, the enhancement of well-being in the workplace and the fight against discrimination in all public administrations, and, even earlier, by Law Decree 198/2006, which established the Code of equal opportunities between men and women, in order to require the adoption of a three-year Positive Action Plan (PAP) to all the public administrations and, subsequently, of a Gender Budget Report, which - in the case of public universities - could count on the guidelines released in 2019 by the highest representative body of Italian universities, the Rectors' Conference (Crui).

Despite this promising set of tools, so far the effects in terms of gender equality in career mechanisms are still rather timid and in many cases they are unable to free themselves from the "syndrome of the first woman reaching a top position"; a role model still completely inscribed in the space of the exception and certainly not commonplace. An emblematic example of this is the low representation of women who occupy the position of rectors in Italian universities: only 7 women rectors out of 84 in total in 2021.

Moreover, though the gender gap in education has quite disappeared over the last few decades and women are often even more highly educated and obtain better academic results than men, they are still underrepresented in universities and research centres (OECD 2012; Stoet and Geary 2015). In particular, while more female students enrolled and graduated than male colleagues, the numbers decrease as the academic career progresses: despite having 52% of women among PhDs (compared to the European average of 47%), their presence decreases as the level rises, and they are underrepresented in the highest positions of the academic ladder: in 2018 only 23.7% of full professors in Italian universities were women, while the percentage increases to 38.4% for associate professors and to 46.7% for assistant professors, with women representing 35.5% of the researcher population as a whole (European Commission 2015, 62).

Naturally, there are differences between disciplinary areas: literary studies, art history, pedagogy, psychology and biology are the sectors with the highest presence of women. Moreover, the proportion of women among the heads of higher education institutions is, on average, one out of five (22% in 2016), highlighting slower and less frequent promotions for women from one rank to another. This scenario confirms the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon, i.e. the larger number of female graduates does not lead to more women in academia and in research centres (Blickenstaff, 2005) because women are more likely to leave the academic career path than men (Bozzon, Murgia, and Villa 2017), and this is the result of a 'glass ceiling' that makes difficult for women that succeed in entering academia to reach the highest positions in the higher education and research organizations, especially in STEM areas.

Taking into account this background scenario, the paragraph 3.4 will report the findings of a qualitative research carried out by the research group of the University of Cagliari (from now on UNICA) through the administration of in-depth interviews to 12 women in leadership, working on top positions in different sectors inside and outside Academia. Firstly we report on the experiences of women on precarious and casual contracts who fall outside of many of the initiatives and supports intended to support career progression and also highlight many of the fundamental issues underlying gendered experiences.

3.1 The experiences of women on the margins.

To address the under-researched nature of the experiences of women working on casual-contracts, Maynooth University partners engaged with ten women who participated in one of two semi-structured focus-group interviews. The longest term of service amongst participants was 21 years with the same university, the shortest was one year. The average timeframe was c5-7 years. All participants were or had within the last year delivered lectures on behalf of the university. Two were also engaged in research and three were involved in other non-lecturing duties that involved face-to-face time with students. Each has been given a pseudonym. The research was ethically approved by the Maynooth University Faculty of Social Science Research Ethics sub-committee. Its semi-structured interview format allowed researchers to introduce initial themes and questions but ensured freedom for participants to direct the conversation. We have assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

3.1.1 Leaving behind previous careers.

A consistent theme for these participants was of women having left behind previous careers, often at a senior management level often because they were unable to manage care responsibilities. For example, Jo shares:

> "I…found myself because of my gender… leaving the corporate sector actually, when my kids were very young, I felt that it was my responsibility. It wasn't really a conversation I had around 'maybe my spouse should consider doing that'. Instead, we never had that conversation, there was just, I suppose, silently presumed that there would be me that would do that."

Women who were now on the margins of the university had previously been business owners, senior management within other public sector organisations, senior levels within other education providers. Part of their reason for moving to work within Higher Education (HE) academia was a sense that education was, as Marie put it "gender friendly or, gender equal" when compared the environment to her previous work in business. This is consistent with other research which found that many women take temporary posts to accommodate their caring roles, which means they do the lower status day-to-day work of departments; work that is often not visible and receives little career recognition (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei 2003; Grummell et al. 2011). Herman describes the "non-linear and frayed career path" that many women experience which is often the result of complex interactions between pull factors (those connected with family) and push factors (work-related issues) which highlights the precariousness of non-typical careers has differently gendered implications (2015:324). Female educational leaders described how they "felt that their childcare responsibilities had to remain invisible in their career"; leading them to try to compete equally with those who had no caring responsibilities.

Despite often high-calibre roles in the past, there was often little or no recognition of the previous work the women we interviewed had done and the many skills they brought as a result. They also found themselves in a much more precarious position with little security of employment. There were many implications to this in terms of advancing their career including sometimes not finding out about more secure roles as they were left out of regular channels of communication, proximity to senior management and a strong sense that they were not really part of the team. For example, "I think the issue is the precarious nature of our work. And the fact that we're all dipping in and out of different things. None of us have full time contracts" (Jo).

3.1.2 The gendered nature of day to day working.

As demonstrated in section 1, there is a dominant socio-cultural model where women are considered naturally better caregivers. This does not only apply in the domestic realm but spills out into workplaces also. To illustrate:

> "*I remember, the ladies were very nice … but the two men were the ones who were doing the shouting… silencing students when we're having a coffee… I just thought that was interesting to see that, you know, the relationship… the ladies were loving, caring, motherly figure. And the guys, you know, they were not… So as a result, there was a lack of balance.*" (Marie)

Many focus group participants found that they ended up doing what Toni describes as "a lot of the labour of love type of work".

One participant, who is also a migrant, gave a different perspective that illuminated the many positive advances that have been made in a European context. In her African country of origin, women must step out of their career in the absence of any government support. She explained:

> "*if you miss work a couple of times your manager, he says 'this is a problem'…. And when you come back [from leave or care commitments], and you find that you have come down the ladder again… it's like you're starting all over.*" (Gloria)

There was a strong sense that there is a gap between policy and practice. There was a veneer of attention to gender but no change to those employed at the margins of the university. Some, but not all participants knew about initiatives such as Athena SWAN but felt distant from these processes. There was a sense that supports that were available were often for women who were already well positioned to advance because of the permanent quality of their contracts, and not for women whose careers had been interrupted or who were employed on part-time and fixed-term contracts, even when these were the very people who were the front line for the university.   There was also a sense of the trickle-down of having a lack of female representation in senior roles in terms of the decisions that are made. For example:

> "*it's the lack of women in power, and, you know, in policy making decisions in government, obviously, has huge impact…a lack of diversity… not just gender bias [but also] race and disability, and ethnic minority groups or minority groups.* (Jo)

3.1.3 The ongoing demands of care/work

The majority of women believed that it took them longer to advance in their careers. Care responsibilities meant it took longer to pursue qualifications. For example, "If I was able to do it full time I would have got there quicker". For example:

> "*I think, for women, it takes so much longer to do what we want, because obviously, we are responsible for the children, culturally, and also it depends on the culture of the family, not only the culture of the societies, I obviously have to be a mom, as well.*" (Ann)

Some participants had positive experiences with mentors and believed these were an important aspect of their progression. For example,

> "*I kind of feel that I have a person like that, and that person would be a career guidance officer. Because of that person I ended up working in Education. She directed me and guided me and I kind of feel that that she really, really directed me and guided me and I am where I am because of her support.*" (Toni)

3.2 The experiences of Women in Senior Management

For women working in senior management roles within HE "the ideal worker continues to be seen as one with no interests or responsibilities outside of work" which profoundly disadvantages women (Bailyn 2003: 141 cited in Grummell et al., 2009). As pointed out in section 1, academics are often expected to do much more in terms of the levels of commitment to the instituition (Currie et al. 2000; Franzway 2000) and the need to be available at all times. Covid19 exacerbated already unequal divisions of labour amongst male and female academics (Tatyana, Shurchkov, & Stearns, 2021). All the while, the expectations that continue to surround career paths and the denigration of care and gender intersect with a complex range of other cultural and structural factors, creating powerful disincentives for females (Grummell et al. 2011). Hidden assumptions and the subtle and complex ways in which discrimination against women takes place in academia, has much to do with that. These can include wide-spread prejudice about women's academic abilities and intellectual authority, men's patronage networks, informal coalitions and exclusions (Morley 2006), as well as "smokescreen of equality, everyday cloning, patronization, and paternalism", which intensify when intersect with other markers of discrimination like ethnicity, age (Bourabain 2020), foreignness or class.

To further evidence these secondary findings, we also carried out field research with women who were already working in leadership positions across a range of Higher Education institutions and providers. We invited 20 women from across a range of roles: Heads of Department, Programme Leaders and centre coordinators to complete an online anonymous questionnaire and received ten detailed responses.[9] The main themes that emerged were:

1. Leadership was a natural progression rather than led by ambition.
2. Structural factors, policies, public support etc.
3. Social perceptions of women in leadership (inc. ageism).
4. Support for women in leadership.

3.2.1 Leadership as a natural progression

The majority of participants reported that they hadn't necessarily been driven by ambition rather they had organically moved into a leadership role or, as this woman puts it "The opportunity presented itself, and after a number of years in precarious employment I decided that it would give me some stability" or again, "I can't say that I wanted a leadership role, but it was more my interest in the work". In one final example: "It was a natural progression for me as I have ... moved away from frontline work in recent years. I sought to pursue a leadership position to try and effect change, however small!"

3.2.2 Perceptions of women in leadership.

For women working in community outreach settings there was a stronger sense of acceptance about their role. Some felt that there were no real issues within their own organisation but that they knew this wasn't the case outside of their own setting. This wasn't universal. This quote below is from someone in a leadership role in the community sector.

> "*I have noticed that Language used to refer to women in leadership includes colloquial terms such as "tough", "harsh", "driven". I am challenged more by women I manage than men. Women openly express that they prefer a male manager in my organisation. I have been asked at an interview how I would manage work and family, I replied that I felt the question was not relevant...*"

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[9] As a result of Covid19 restrictions, we were unable to organise interviews or focus-group discussion with this latter cohort given demands on their time. Instead, we invited them to complete a once-off, online anonymous questionnaire that enquires into their experiences as women in leadership.

These *micromachismos* are not uncommon within patriarchy and can consist of belittling women in their daily interaction through verbal and non-verbal language, micro-aggressions, invisibilization, ridiculing, withholding information, scientific sabotage, denigration, blaming, taking unearned credit for others' work, sexual harassment, questioning of women's intellectual independence or evoking motherhoods in informal asides.[10] Furthermore, as Fitzgerald (2018) pointed out drawing on the metaphors of "looking good" and "being good", female senior leaders are constantly evaluated. This includes both their gestures and behaviour and physical appearance. They are "simultaneously required to negotiate an inherently masculine culture yet at the same time are expected to exercise a level of femininity" (ibid). On a daily basis, they are operating among contradictions, stresses and tensions. The consequences of micropolitics of gender discrimination are not only affecting women's wellbeing in their labour relations, but often significantly limit professional development hindering women's promotion to higher professional categories (Montes-Lopez 2019). This can create a silent exclusion of women. Indeed, women that are less comfortable with masculinist structures, cultures and identities are to be seen less in senior leadership positions, leading to a higher presence of women decision-makers who have low levels of gender awareness and who present themselves as fitting these structures (O'Connor 2018). For those working within the main university site, here are some of their descriptions of their working environments:

> "*I've experienced sexist comments and micro-aggressions in a variety of education and academic spaces and places e.g., reviewer reports, committee meetings, student feedback used as metrics in my evaluations etc. Some of my curriculum design and content research interests and research activities on social justice education, gender and sexualities have been viewed as lesser-value or unsuitable (usually by male academics and reviewers higher in the hierarchy).*"

For another woman, "*Everything I achieved is thanks to very hard work on my part. That may not always the case for men who often advance thanks to buddy ties and networking*". This woman, who is in a senior management role within a large Irish university, reports regularly experiencing "*Microaggressions - Sometimes but not always including the following: Ignored, or contribution ignored, at meetings; Talked over at meetings; Being underestimated*".

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[10] For a more comprehensive review of these daily discriminations see: O'Connor (2020)

3.3 The need for Continuous Professional Development

Overall, our research participants were open to some form of continuous professional development but there was a strong sense that what was mostly needed was space to create a community where people could come together and validate and support each other. Many people believed they are already well qualified and that perhaps it wasn't women who needed to be trained. To illustrate:

> "*At some point, the education may need to be for men. And so there was a case study I ran across just in the course that I'm facilitating that that was great that they tried to have women mentor women, and they realise pretty quickly and the women were strong enough to stand up and say, Actually, we need to mentor the men that are in senior positions.*" (Fiona).

There was also the suggestion that education should be for HR staff and the very real challenges that precarious working conditions have on people's wellbeing, not just financially but much broader also. To demonstrate:

> "*They need to be aware of the impact that the legalistic approach to treating people is having on us. And work from a resource and benefit model and not a deficit model. Maybe just focused on the HR department. It seems to me like, you know, that they're very powerful within the university. They're not there for the employees at all, they're there for the legalistic outcomes*". (Sandra)

Of those we engaged with who were already in Senior Management roles, eight out of ten were already offering mentoring and training to other women in the workplace. However, in all cases this wasn't formal, rather was something these women have initiated themselves. Offering this support to other women is an important part of how they embody the leadership role they are in. For them, there was a need to expand and formalise these roles more as articulated in this contribution from a senior manager. For example:

> "*I've been thinking more consciously about mentoring over the last couple of years and I'd indeed be interested in getting training about this and building my skillset and capacity. I've been trying to enact my values more and I've been informally supporting women colleagues in their workload and career progression plans e.g., sharing my strategies and advice about promotion applications.*"

For others there was a sense that this wasn't the barrier to participants. As one person puts it, "I feel I am already professionally developed". Similar to much literature that informs this report, a dominant feeling instead was that the barriers were structural and not inter-personal and that although mentoring was very important, it could not address the structural dimensions of gender-based inequality.

3.4 To the top and beyond: Women in Leadership inside and outside the Academia.

The qualitative research carried on by UNICA team made the choice of involving not only women working in HE environments, using the method of in-depth interview, but to also take into account the close relationship between local stakeholders (in the economic, political, social sphere) and the university, as a) agency for the production of knowledge and promotion of the culture of gender inclusiveness and empowerment; b) institution for the education of qualified people; c) work environment with a complex organization chart up to the top positions.
These experts were interviewed using the Skype and Teams platform and have been distinguished on the basis of their current role inside and outside the academia:

- *Inside the Academia:* the former rector; the dean of the Engineering and Architecture Department
- *Outside the Academia:* the regional and the metropolitan Counsellors for Gender Equality; the President of the Order of Psychologists of Sardinia; two local mayors; the President of the regional network of Local Municipalities; the former President of the Confederation of local enterprises; a city and a regional politician; the funder and business developer of the start-up named "Open Campus".

The in-depth interviews proved to be an excellent tool to bring out a double perspective in the analysis of inequalities related to the lower number of women in leadership positions inside and outside HE and in confirming the need to offer training to HE staff to remove existing barriers and encourage other women to pursue these positions: a) a systemic perspective, reconstructed by the women leaders interviewed on behalf of the institution they reached the top of; b) a biographical and individual perspective, linked to their life and career path from the moment of access to that of the achievement of a top position, with all the resistances and opportunities encountered along the way.

a) Systemic Perspective: What happens inside and outside HE Environments?
- Persistent Gender Biases and Stereotypes linked to "moral careers".
- Tendency to confirm horizontal and vertical gender segregation.

- The need for women to constantly demonstrate that they are "the best" in order to even be able to compete for a promotion.
- The measures to support the balance between private care responsibilities and professional tasks are too limited.
- Women are more often forced into dilemmas of choice, which involve even long breaks, and continuous stop and go or stop and that's it (e.g. renounce investing in fellowship abroad to improve their professional profile).
- All the strategies proposed to give greater visibility to women and positive examples are urgently needed, such as:
  o specific leadership training programs starting from the first year of university and during the PhD courses
  o peer-to-peer coaching with women already in top positions
  o national and international networking

b) Biographical Perspective: What Happened to me?

- Very complicated stories, full of sacrifices, difficult choices, moments of discouragement, but also of key figures who played as role models: often the father, himself a university professor, more rarely the mother, or a particularly far-sighted and supportive teacher.
- Huge investment in self-esteem, despite the frequent sense of isolation.
- Strategic ability to manage the resistances perceived by both men and women when the top position has been reached by a woman, especially in case of a young woman.
- Investment in personal reputation rather than authority, based on merit and an assertive but empathetic, non-aggressive management style.
- All women who reach a top position in HE should feel a sort of «moral constraint", that is a sense of responsibility towards all women still weaker than men in their career paths, using their decision-making power to undermine the system from within.
- Initial rejection of the idea of pink quotas as a ghetto and a shameful privilege, then replaced by the understanding of the need for these measures at least for the mechanisms of access and evaluation in the academy.

So, what's next? The main challenges and strategies that Universities should adopt, according to our 12 women "at the top", in order to promote a better gender equality in HE leadership, are the following:

a) Adopting institutional tools to promote gender equality in academia. In particular, the adoption, on June 29th, 2020, by the Academic Senate and the Board of UNICA of its first Gender Equality Plan (in Italy there are still very few Geps, less than ten), has been perceived as an excellent step by our stakeholders. This GEP has been designed in the framework of the H2020 SUPERA project (Supporting the Promotion of Gender Equality in Research and Academia) and includes 32 specific actions focused on 4 key areas:
1. Recruitment, maintenance, career progression, work-family reconciliation policies (horizontal and vertical segregation);
2. Leadership and decision-making processes (accountability, transparency, inclusion);
3. Gender dimension in research and teaching;
4. Gender prejudices and stereotypes, sexism and sexual harassment.

b) Giving priority to organizational well-being as a premise of psychological well-being, not just greater symmetry in academia numbers between men and women. In particular, family-friendly policies always have a central role in gender-equality policies in the workplace. UNICA complies with Italian legislation on compulsory maternity leave and optional leave for (biological and adoptive) parents (paternity leave, parental leave, rest for breastfeeding, child sick leave). Detailed information on any type of leave is available at the university website in transparency handbooks, which clarify that after a first "free period" of parental leave (30 days for Admin staff and 45 days for Faculty members) there is a cut in salary, which drops to 30% of the full amount. Since 2015 UniCa is committed to pursuing family-friendly policies, whose direct beneficiaries are students and personnel (research and teaching staff and technical and administrative staff). We can mention, for example, the Baby-Card (Tessera Baby) and Pink Room (Stanza Rosa) Projects that aim to promote study and work-life balance. There is evidence of a gradual but steady process of institutional learning within the domain of family-friendly policies. The ultimate goal of promoting gender equality, both in terms of quality of services offered and quantity of potential beneficiaries involved, can be achieved only through the constant monitoring of the ways in which these practices/policies are implemented. The collection of administrative data about the number of potential beneficiaries, the actual use of the services and the dissemination of transparent information about the services to prospective and current students are fundamental for estimating the effect of the policy and suggesting further improvements. Women's greater family duties and responsibilities also in Academia – in line with a well-known picture of gender asymmetry in the

division of household work in Italy, where men's contributions are among the lowest in Europe - explain why female staff should turn down more often than their male colleagues an appointment or other professional growth opportunities. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, and changes are evident among younger, better educated generations.

c) Bringing the issue of Gender Equality to an institutional level, starting from the inclusion of Gender Equality mainstream approach in the organization structure and in the strategic planning and mission of the University, through the implementation of gender-specific measures and practices, and the revision of existing procedures in which Gender Equality issues should be considered. From this point of view, the women leaders interviewed identified the need of offering training to staff involved in leadership positions, including the training for the mentors. But also training and guidance activities addressed to academic staff and students to deconstruct gender bias and promote a gender inclusive work and study environment; or regular training sessions for research staff to add a gender perspective in their work in any disciplinary field.

d) All the women interviewed confirmed that mentoring activities by senior colleagues are useful to ensure that junior academics' personal goals are consistent with the institution's expectations. Many studies have shown that female researchers are less productive than their male counterparts (for example, for Italy, we suggest reading the interesting article by Marianna Filandri and Silvia Pasqua, titled 'Being good isn't good enough': gender discrimination in Italian academia" (2019). Quoting their words, consequently, "gender differences in publication output could explain the lower percentage of women among associate and full professors in Italian universities. If this were the case, there would be no gender discrimination and policies should be promoted to sustain women's research activity. A second possible explanation of the gender gap in Italian academia could be women's reluctance to apply for promotion. Previous literature has shown that women are less self-confident than men and therefore are less likely to apply for high-responsibility jobs and career advancement, and, specifically for academia. Again, if this were the case, we could not claim that gender discrimination exists and policies to sustain female researchers through mentoring should be promoted". Therefore, the planning within UNICA GEP of paths aimed at supporting female researchers' careers through mentoring activities, through the identification of peers within all structures, appears as a valid tool to reduce the asymmetry of opportunities that bind women more in reaching top positions.

3.5 But when will the exception become the rule?

It would be necessary to go beyond the syndrome of the «first woman ever» in every field, even in the academy: in Italy the first woman president of the National Research Council has just been appointed, at UNICA the first female rector has just finished her term of office and in general we still talk about the first women Nobel Prize for STEM fields and so on. We are in 2021: the time to pass from the gratification for the exceptions to the normality of the rule of symmetry between men and women in top positions, also and especially in the world of HE, has now arrived.

4. TOWARDS MORE GENDER-BALANCE IN DECISION-MAKING; MEASURES AND CHALLENGES

In many ways gender balance has already improved in Higher Education (HE) and the number of women in some cases exceeds the number of men. However, data shows that this does not translate to more gender-balanced decision-making bodies (UNESCO IESALC 2021). In other words, even women who have entered HE and Research and Innovation (R&I) institutions, continue to experience significant obstacles to spaces of power. The existing literature and experiences of leading scholars-activists for gender equality in Higher Education and the field work we have uncovered show ongoing challenges when it comes to fostering change in the field of decision-making, such as the active and passive (non-action) resistance and the double burden that a few women in decision-making bodies carry.

This confirms that gender-based inequality in universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and R&I is a complex problem, which requires a continuous reflective approach. Underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions and a gridlocking of their leadership, continues to be part of broader problems with gender-inequality and therefore requires ongoing attention. Particular manifestations of these problems will vary from institution to institution, depending on national and other contexts. However, the main reasons continue to be deeply rooted in patriarchal structures that are stitched into the fabric of the whole of society, including both the design of research and education institutions (historically created by men and for men) and the daily culture and micropolitics of gender discrimination that continue within these structures (Montes-López 2019).

To achieve durable institutional transformation, we must therefore build gender competence for a gender-fair recruitment process but also work towards and a deeper cultural shift to tackle daily micropolitical practices and gender beliefs, which limit

women's incorporation in decision-making processes and leadership. Tackling the over-burden and possible new gender inequalities such as those related to the growing casualisation of work and the way women in general have been more impacted by the negative effects of Covid19 (Jaffe, 2021) and the unequal care burden during Covid19. For women in academia, research by (Tatyana, Shurchkov, & Stearns, 2021: 2) found:

> *Female academics, particularly those who have children report a disproportionate reduction in time dedicated to research relative to what comparable men and women without children experience. Both men and women report substantial increases in childcare and housework burdens, but women experienced significantly larger increases than men did*.

Institutions can do more such as reducing women's workloads through subject-specific quotas. For example, the cascade model, which refers to the target proportion of women at each career level depending on the proportion of women at the next lowest qualification level, can be used. Institutions can balance decision-making bodies through institutional rules and specific measures so their involvement in gender inequality is crucial.

However, considering the above-mentioned problems, we argue the need to develop different approaches that can complement targets or quotas building on institutional key stakeholder's support. Even when quotas are mandatory according to legislation, institutional support is crucial to implement them taking into account specific contexts that influence the efficiency, fairness and sustainability of these measures. Men must take the lead also and become more active agents of change, a point that was made by some of those we interviewed at length.

Hence, while targets and quotas are crucial and needed, they are not sufficient on their own. To achieve gender balance in decision making it is necessary to build gender competent decision-making bodies, it means their functionality and recruitment to it must be gender-sensitive, and this involves all people in decision-making positions, regardless their sex. Gender competence, requires skills and training for men and women to make them able to constantly reflect on their possible gender bias, would allow for a fairer recruitment process and decision-making body (Wroblewski, 2019).

4.1 The need to problematize leadership

Going beyond the numbers approach requires not only a focus on supporting women's motivation to take leadership positions but is about reflecting and challenging the socially expected model of leadership in and of itself. Leadership is not always positive; rather can have a toxic effect in the wrong hands (Smith 2008), there can also be "toxic" expectations towards those in leadership roles.

The very concept of leadership should therefore be reimagined in a way that avoids creating pressures both for men and women and adapt to challenge historically developed "masculine" forms of competitive, hierarchical, non-empathic or instrumentalist type of leadership (Roth et al 2020). Many people, including those with the potential to foster transformation towards a more gender inclusive environment, are often simply not attracted to leadership as career-path and as one's place in the community.

Moreover, new social movements talk about the need for the "feminization of politics" (Roth et al., 2020) that refers not only to increasing the presence of women in politics, but points to the required qualitative change in the leadership style. Avoiding essentialisation in leadership would help interrupt social constructions of masculinity and femininity that devalue the role of women to caring relations. Instead, more horizontal cooperation, or "radical pragmatism" focused on concrete steps are needed to achieve the aims instead of trying-to-control-it-all traditional models of leadership. This would in turn help tackle women's lack of motivation to participate in leadership positions not only within social movements but within academia also.

Little will change if the micropolitical practices and gender beliefs based on stereotypes and prejudice go unchallenged, and some policies can implicitly aim at changing women rather than changing institutions. The first might include actions addressed at capacitating and encouraging women to enter in decision-making bodies, as if the problem were in women who do not want to apply for leadership positions and not a broader structural, culturally and institutionally based inequality. Nevertheless, focusing on encouraging women only, without considering the structural, institutional and cultural factors of their lower presence in decision-making bodies, will not bring a qualitative, deeper transformation towards a more gender fair institutions. Last but not least, achieving gender-balanced decision making must go hand-in-hand with other institutional measures that address work-life balance, sexual harassment and inadequate care supports amongst others.

4.2 The need to tackle the resistance

Multiple studies have shown that both theory and strategy of gender equality must also diagnose, recognize, reflect and tackle the existing significant resistance toward gender equality policies and actions. Despite more egalitarian discourses, one will still find practices and actions that inhibit change. These practices are outcomes of gendered organizational cultures, not only a product of the existing personnel, and part of the social position of dominant men in a gendered world (Handbook on Resistance, 2016). O'Connor (2019) distinguishes three different cultural frames that create and legitimize under-representation of women: excellence, which is socially constructed as masculine and undervalues activities commonly attributed to women; fit, which counter against women because leadership positions are gendered and the characteristic and behaviour of a leader are defined from a masculinist definition; and national interest, a perspective that takes into account the national context, with states that in their structural arrangements tend to place women's interests and their work in peripheral positions.

Resistance to change is often related to men's feeling of losing status and privilege (Handbook on Resistance, 2016). Resistances are usually experienced through informal power dynamics and micro-politics: strategies and tactics used to further group or individual interests. Behind this micro-politics, one finds stereotypical thinking and cognitive bias i.e. the devaluation of women as women (O'Connor, 2019; Handbook on Resistance, 2016). Resistances can explicitly undermine women's career prospects through biased CV evaluations or less funding, where both men and women can rate the male candidate more competent when the only difference in the application is gender (O'Connor, 2019; Handbook on Resistance, 2016). Also, they can take an active form through behaviours such as blaming/accusing, blocking, or raising objections, such as that there are not enough women to implement quotas (Handbook on Resistance, 2016). But there exist more passive ways of resistance and acts of withdrawal from an action to prevent it, such as foot-dragging, rhetorical change, withholding information, exhausting women and wasting their time (getting them to sit on housekeeping boards/those that lack power), or standing by and allowing the change to fail (Handbook on Resistance, 2016).

5. CONCLUSION

Equality legislation, intended to promote women's participation in leadership, has had contradictory effects placing immense strains on current female leaders to service boards, and further deepening the cultural divide between men and women's experiences of educational leadership. This continued the vicious circle of women having less visibility (due to a lower research portfolio), while also being extra-visible for gender equality purposes (O'Connor 2007a; Grummell et al. 2011). The absence of care-related supports, an over-burden with governance responsibilities, and the emotional toll of negativity towards their role all contribute to the struggle many women experience in developing their academic credentials and curricula as they seek to compete with their male counterparts in an environment with an escalating emphasis on productivity (publishing) and competition with other scholars. Legislation has thus had contradictory effects placing immense strains on current female leaders to service boards, and further deepening the cultural divide between men and women's experiences of educational leadership.

International research does recognise the importance of continuous professional development (CPD) and of mentoring to address the significance of gender, race, socio-economic and disability in the provision of mentorship especially in hegemonic cultures of patriarchy, class or race. Interpersonal relationships are core to mentorship and so "mentees gravitated to mentors with whom they felt they shared common background, and similarly, women have been found to favour female mentors who are viewed to have succeeded in their scientific careers despite the significant gender related obstacles: such as balancing the role of motherhood and male dominated institutional culture" (Thackwell et al. 2018: 792). The relational aspect also highlights the potential contribution of mentorship and ongoing communities of practice for social capital and networks. Likewise, continuous professional development initiatives provide an important marker of recognition of ongoing gender inequalities and support.

To understand gender inequality in academia and design efficient gender equality plans, it is important is to collect the proper data, constantly re-examining it together with the newest qualitative scientific knowledge. Mere statistics without this reflective approach do not allow for a real understanding of the state of play in institutional power relations. Nor do they inform us about the sustainability of the measures taken for concrete women in power positions (below described double burden). Furthermore, quotas implemented without any other measures and in a context with a

low ratio of women in the institution, can often lead to the so-called double burden of women because of the failure to implement the necessary additional support. Moreover, if women remain in the minority at senior level, their workload can be increased as the same women must sit on different governance structures therefore overburdening them.

Care responsibilities are a core factor at every level: entry and especially re-entry to the workforce, the challenges of day-to-day work, and the interruption to a smooth career trajectory. There is also a sense, particularly from those already in leadership roles, that there is work to be done in terms of how women in the workforce are perceived on a day-to-day basis with many gendered characteristics prevalent and embodied through their treatment by others.

A core finding from this research is some critical questions on who it is that need training? There was a strong sense that these women, all holding post-graduate qualifications, were not the ones who need training, which should rather be directed to HR in the first instance but also to male colleagues who might be encouraged to contemplate how they embody male privilege in particular. These are the factors that must be addressed in a continuous professional development process that helps build the capacity of women but that appreciates the wider contextual features at play. It must also be informed by a certain pedagogic philosophy that draws from the following principles

- A rootedness in equality, justice and empowerment
- A needs-based approach that is driven by the lived experience of women at the centre of the phenomena
- A facilitative, participatory process.
    - That promotes critical thinking.
    - That offers a social analysis of the socially constructed nature of gender and other intersectional features.
    - That focuses on relationships building.

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