The equality paradox: sexual harassment and gender inequality in a UK university

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ABSTRACT

The incremental progression of women into academia, as both students and staff, has disrupted, but not dismantled, cultures and practices of gender inequality. The #MeToo and other movements have engendered a focus on the prevalence, and normalization, of sexual violence on campus. Most UK studies focus on intra-student or staff-student experiences, which construct it as either a student issue or individualized transgressions. In this article, we draw on data from a convergent mixed-methods study in a UK university, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected from staff and students on experiences of sexual harassment and perceptions of gender inequality. In this article, we focus specifically on staff data. It is argued that a cultural practice, or conducive context, of gender inequality within the institution is the scaffold for sexual harassment. This invidious circle of gender inequality and sexual harassment is mutually supportive and sustaining. Using this one university as a case study, we argue that for women in academia, parity in entry has not equated to parity of experience – with women having to navigate the paradox of the academy as an ostensibly welcoming, yet hostile, environment.

In the UK context, it was reported by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in collaboration with the Everyday Sexism Project (2016) that 52% of their 1,533 female participants reported sexual harassment at work. Almost all perpetrators were male colleagues and a fifth were men with a managerial role or position of authority over those they victimized. Similarly, research by Zero Tolerance (2017) in Scotland found that over 70% of the 600 respondents, primarily women in the public sector including universities, colleges, and local and national government agencies, experienced or witnessed sexual harassment. University campuses have come under much critical scrutiny due to the exposure of the levels of sexual harassment and assault that many students report experiencing. Evidence of prevalence in the UK, the US and Australia, where much of this work has been conducted, is damning (Phipps & Smith, 2012; USVreact, 2018). Conservative estimates of the higher education landscape is one in which at least a fifth of all female students have experienced unwanted sexual contact (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Fedina, Holmes & Backes, 2018Fedina, et al., 2018). A systematic review by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020, pg. 7) found that overall on a global level: 'exposure to sexual harassment in higher education varies between 11% and 73% for heterosexual women (median 49%) and between 3% and 26% for heterosexual men (median 15%)'.

The first UK study by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2011) reported that over 70% of female students had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment. A 2018 study found that 62% of student participants had experienced sexual violence (Revolt Sexual Assault & Student Room, 2018) and the 2020 review by Jones and colleagues of 16 studies on gender-based violence (GBV) on UK campuses found up to 69% of female students and up to 39% of male students had experienced sexual harassment and up to 34% of female students and up to 17% of male students experienced sexual assault. Based on these data, sexual harassment on UK campuses could be characterized as a normative aspect of student culture.

However, this is not a UK problem alone. In the US context, around a third of female undergraduates have been subject to sexual violence since starting their studies (Mabachi, Quiason, & Doan, 2020) with Potter and colleagues (2020) reporting that one in five female undergraduates are sexually assaulted during their time as a student. The Cantor and colleagues (2015) review of 27 US institutions found that 62% of female students had been sexually harassed. Studies from other global contexts report a similar landscape. For example, the Australian Human Rights commission collected data on sexual harassment from 39 Australian universities involving over 30,000 students and found:

Around half of all university students (51%) were sexually harassed on at least one occasion in 2016, and 6.9% of students were sexually assaulted on at least one occasion in 2015 or 2016. A significant proportion of the sexual harassment experienced by students in 2015

and 2016 occurred in university settings. (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017, pg. 3) (see also Anitha & Lewis, 2019; Valls, Puigvert, Melgar, & Garcia-Yeste, 2016; Feltes, Balloni, Czapska, Bodelon, & Stenning, 2012 for European level data)

Most of these data are self-report (excluding the US where students often have to complete the surveys for class credits) and may therefore attract those who have more interest or experience of sexual harassment or other forms of GBV; however, the similarity in patterns of prevalence is compelling.

Sexual harassment on campus is not limited to student experiences, with the Guardian newspaper (2017) reporting that between 2011/12 and 2016/17 there were at least 169 allegations of sexual misconduct by university staff against students. Similarly, the 2018 NUS study reported that 15.6% of female students and 7% of male students had been touched in an uncomfortable way by a staff member. Furthermore, staff are also targets of sexual harassment with over half of the female participants in the 2016 University and College Union research being sexually harassed in their institution: in two-thirds of the cases, the perpetrator was a colleague and in a quarter of cases was a student (UCU, 2016a). Also, in most cases, the perpetrators were male and in a more senior position (Henning et al., 2017; Hollis, 2015; Keashley, 2019; Keashley & Neuman, 2010; Wellcome Trust, 2020). When focusing exclusively on intra-staff experiences of sexual harassment, there are actually higher levels of sexual harassment in university campuses than other workplaces (Henning et al., 2017; Hodgins & McNamara, 2019; Keashley, 2019; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). When both staff and student experiences are considered, it is legitimate to characterize universities as not just sites of learning but also 'sites of violence' (Anitha & Lewis, 2019; Bows, Stephen, & Westmarland, 2015; Jones et al, 2020; NUS, 2011; NUS and The 1752Group, 2018; Phipps, 2020).

In this article, we argue that conceptualizing sexual harassment as a 'student problem' obfuscates the real issue, which is the cultural context of the university. We argue that a paradox exists in universities whereby, despite women gaining entry into academia as employees and students, the wider institutional structure, and related norms, values and practices, are hostile to women. The institutional, experiential and organizational cultural conditions create, and maintain, a climate in which gender inequality is preserved and maintained. Given that sexual harassment is predicted on both gender and power inequalities, this gender disparity therefore sustains sexual harassment. Kelly (2007, 2016) refers to this form of structural maintenance as the 'conducive context' for sexual harassment. We argue that the conducive context of universities has created a paradox in which women are welcomed only in a partial and piecemeal manner due to gendered power inequalities maintained by sexual harassment. Without squarely addressing gender inequality, and dismantling the wider institutional conducive context, any and all attempts to tackle sexual harassment on campus will fail.

The conducive context

In 1970, the UK Equal Pay Act established the principles of equality of pay and workplace conditions for all employees, the Sex Discrimination Act in followed in 1975 and, in 2006 and 2010, the Equality Acts created a list of nine protected characteristics including sex

(Cree, Morrison, Mitchell, & Gulland, 2020). And yet, none of these measures have produced equal pay, treatment or conditions for female employees, and nor is equality close to being achieved (Equal Measures 2030, 2019). Whilst women's entry into academia has disrupted, it has not dismantled, the historic iniquitous gender order of universities. Gender inequalities and gendered power relations are deeply entrenched in most organizations, including universities (Green, Parkin, & Hearn, 2000; Hearn & Parkin, 2001). Globally, this workplace hierarchy translates to women occupying only a quarter of senior positions and being over-represented at the bottom (Grant Thornton, 2018). In the UK, men occupy 73% of CEO positions and senior officials, and are 70% of managers and directors and in Scotland, women hold less than a third (27%) of *all* 'positions of power, authority and influence' (Engender, 2017). In the UK, a persistent and pernicious pay gap prevails where women are paid less across all occupations than their male counterparts (ONS, 2018b).

This gender oppression and segregation is present in UK universities with women over-represented in administrative roles (UCU, 2017). In 2016/17, of the 206,870 academic staff and 212,835 non-academic staff in UK universities, academic contracts were disproportionality held by men (54.3% men and 45.7% women) with women more likely than men to be on non-academic contracts (62.6% women and 37.4% men) (HESA, 2018). In addition to this horizontal segregation, there are striking vertical exclusions compressing female academic staff into just '22% of professors, 35% of deputy and pro vice-chancellors, and 20% of vice-chancellors' (ECU, 2015). Similarly, in Scotland, only 23% of the professoriate and 31.6% of principals are women (Engender, 2020). The national average 15% gender pay gap across universities (ONS, 2018a) and the relics of the male-only environ (consider the degree titles conferred on students – masters and bachelors) makes us concur with the argument that despite entry into the university, it remains a hostile environment for women (Ahmed, 2017; Bacchi, 1998; Connell, 2019; HESA, 2018; Puwar, 2004).

Universities are aware, to some extent, of the entrenched gendered inequalities as evidenced through measures that have been instigated such as the UK Higher Education Athena SWAN charter, which benchmarks progress in gender equality. However, this has been widely criticized for actually increasing workload for female academics who are often tasked with the admin for demonstrating where the department is advancing or, more likely, failing gender equality targets (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Wilkinson, 2019). The lack of a systemic and structural response to deeply ingrained gender hierarchies within organizations is an issue that feminists have highlighted including Acker who developed the concept of 'gendered institutions' (1990) and 'inequality regimes' (2006) in which she both identified the ways in which organizational studies had heretofore ignored the role of gender and related inequalities in the workplace. Indeed, Hearn and Parkin (2001) argue that if organizations do not intervene to change these norms then they will both maintain and reproduce further gender inequalities.

Kelly (2007/2016) describes a 'conducive context' as the environment where 'forms of gendered power and authority and matrices of domination are in play' (Kelly, 2016, [no page number]). The framing of the 'conducive context' facilitates an understanding of the conditions that conspire to create the climate in which gender inequality, and

manifestations thereof, can occur. The conducive context of academia is one in which women are excluded from positions of decision-making, influence and power, as demonstrated above, and which maintains horizontal and vertical segregations. This environmental context of gender inequality across all levels of the institution is then the 'conducive context' in which sexual harassment is perpetrated. Concurrently, the sexual harassment of women by male colleagues then operates to maintain this structure of gender inequality, whereby both are mutually supporting and sustaining.

This interrelationship between gender inequality and sexual harassment is illustrated by Richman and colleagues (1999, pg. 368) who describe sexual harassment both as a product and producer of gender inequality because it 'creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment'. Burri and Alexandra (2017) develop the 'invidious circle' model to describe the way in which manifestations of discrimination feed into rationalizations of discrimination, which in turn then creates the environment for further discriminatory behaviour. We argue that this 'invidious circle' thesis demonstrates the ways in which gender inequality and sexual harassment are enmeshed and mutually supportive as it is about how men exert power over women in the university workplace which creates the context for sexual harassment. This 'invidious circle' conceptualization is a hopeful analysis because it offers a structural solution by refocussing away from an individualized account of sexual harassment to challenging institutional cultural norms. Pease and Flood (2008) argue that organizations must take responsibility for changing sexist or oppressive social norms whereby: '[t]he role of the community then goes beyond dealing with perpetrators to taking on responsibility to challenge the community norms that enable perpetrators of violence to feel comfortable about their beliefs in relation to women' (Pease & Flood, 2008, pg. 550, see also Hearn & Parkin, 2001).

In this article, we apply Kelly's (2007/2016) 'conducive context' concept to illustrate how the historic context of the university as a male preserve pervades current cultural norms to maintain an asymmetrical gender regime (Connell, 2019). We apply this analysis to a dataset from a Scottish university staff cohort; this case study approach offers empirical data to advance our understanding of the context of the operationalization, or invidious circle, of sexual harassment. In other words, we use the data to argue that the paradox women in academia encounter is that whilst substantively, equality of entry has been achieved, the gender inequality regime remains firmly intact.

Methods

Research design

This research explored perceptions of campus safety, gender-based violence, and the wider cultural context of a higher education institution and consisted of a convergent mixed-method design, in which the research team collected quantitative survey data and interview data concurrently (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We took a case study approach and collected data from one institution. Whilst we also collected data from students, this paper reports on staff experiences of sexual harassment and perceptions of gender inequality in the university.

Procedures

Data were collected between July 2017 and January 2018. A link to an online survey was distributed via email to all university staff and students with hard copies left with self-addressed envelopes for staff that tended not to use email (see Saleh & Bista, 2017). Ethical approval was sought and secured from the university ethics committee. To comply with data protection, human resources sent staff an email with a link to participate in the survey. Whilst this approach ensured all staff were sent the survey link and information, being sent this information from a central university address rather than an independent researcher/research team will have impacted the response rate. The invitation email explained the survey was voluntary with no names, contact details or IP addresses captured. Pseudonyms are used in the description of findings here.

On submission of the survey, a pop-up box invited respondents to participate in a one-to-one interview. This process meant a self-selecting cohort of interview participants but ensured anonymity. This also meant that it was not possible to match interview participants to their survey submission. Interviews were conducted in person at the university, recorded digitally, and lasted approximately 1 h.

Consent was a prerequisite to participation in both the survey and interview, with consent considered as ongoing and negotiable. Interview participants were offered a post-interview 7-day reflection period to remove their data (none did so) (Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010). A factsheet developed in partnership with the local rape crisis centre was positioned on the submission page of the survey and distributed in hard copy format to all interview participants. All data were stored securely and password protected and hard copy materials were locked in separate filing cabinets in different locations (Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012).

Staff sample

Whilst 685 staff started the survey, 82 dropped out and we conducted analysis on the remaining 603. This approximated a 16% response rate. Of the 603 staff survey participants, 68.7% identified as female, 29.7% as male and 1.7% did not indicate their gender; 5.3% identified as LGBT+; 3.8% as BME; and 4.6% indicated a disability. Almost half (46.8%) the participants were from Administrative and Professional Services, 30.0% were Academic staff, 16.7% were operational staff, 3.8% technical, and 2.7% did not declare. Of these 603 respondents, 17 participated in an interview: 12 women and five men; five were aged between 25 and 34, seven between 35 and 44, four between 45 and 54 and one was aged between 55 and 64; six of the 17 were LGBT+; one was BME; two had a disability; four were Academics and 13 from Administrative and Professional Services (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interview participants' demographics.

	Age	Sex	LGBT+	BME	Disability	Staff category
Emma	25–34	Female	Yes	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services

	Age	Sex	LGBT+	BME	Disability	Staff category
Georgia	25–34	Female	Yes	No	No	Academic
Amy	25–34	Female	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Kyle	25–34	Male	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Ross	35–44	Male	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Alan	35–44	Male	No	No	Yes	Administrative & Professional Services
Fiona	35–44	Female	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Laura	35–44	Female	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Graham	35–44	Male	No	No	No	Academic
Lucy	35–44	Female	Yes	No	Yes	Administrative & Professional Services
Elaine	45–54	Female	Yes	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Alison	35–44	Female	Yes	No	No	Academic
Steven	45–54	Male	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Aisha	45–54	Female	Yes	Yes	No	Academic
Anne	45–54	Female	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Lorna	45–54	Female	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services
Sandra	55–64	Female	No	No	No	Administrative & Professional Services

All names are pseudonyms for interview participants.

Survey scales

Scales measuring gender-based violence and perceptions of gender inequality were developed for the survey through reviewing existing literature, consulting with our Research Advisory Group experts, and then adapting these to reflect both a higher education and a Scottish context (such as changing language and context for relevancy).

Sexual harassment scale

As the intention was for the scale to be a brief measure assessing five kinds of gender-based violence, we drew questions from validated scales measuring emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual harassment and coercion, sexual assault, rape and stalking (see McCarry, Donaldson, McCullough, McGoldrick, & Stevenson, 2018 for details). We created a scale comprising 26 questions, asking participants to indicate if they had experienced each behaviour in the past 12

months and in their lifetimes. In this paper, only data elicited from five sexual harassment questions in the past 12

months are used (Cronbach's alpha

=

.89). See Table 2 for sexual harassment questions.

Table 2. Staff participants who experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12

months.

	All respondents[a] ($n = 547$)	**Female ($n = 371$)**	**Male ($n = 166$)**	χ^2	**Cramer's V**
Someone has perpetrated any form of sexual harassment against you	26.0% ($n = 142$)	32.9% ($n = 122$)	10.8% ($n = 18$)	28.906 ***	.232
Someone wolf-whistled or cat-called you	15.5% ($n = 85$)	21.0% ($n = 78$)	3.6% ($n = 6$)	26.343***	.221
Someone made unwanted sexual	15.5% ($n = 85$)	19.4% ($n = 72$)	6.6% ($n = 11$)	14.336***	.163

	All respondents[a] (n = 547)	Female (n = 371)	Male (n = 166)	$\chi2$	Cramer's V
remarks about you or to you					
Someone asked you unwanted questions about your sexuality or sex-life	8.8% (n = 48)	9.7% (n = 36)	7.2% (n = 12)	.863	.040
Someone tried to draw you into a discussion of sexual matters	11.7% (n = 64)	13.5% (n = 50)	8.4% (n = 14)	2.779	.072
Someone stared, leered or ogled at you in a way that made you uncomfortable	16.5% (n = 90)	22.6% (n = 84)	3.0% (n = 5)	31.960***	.244

Pearson Chi-square tests were conducted to explore if female staff or male staff were more likely to experience sexually harassing behaviours. The findings showed that female staff were likely than male staff to experience any form of sexual harassment and the specific behaviours of wolf-whistling or cat-calling; unwanted sexual remarks; and staring, leering or ogling.

[a]Includes staff who reported their gender identity as 'Other'.

*p <

.05. **p <

.01. ***p <

.001

Perceptions of gender inequality scale

Gender inequality was described in the survey as 'where people are treated differently and unequally based on their gender. This might refer to a difference in pay between men and women or an unequal distribution of men and women in different roles or at different levels'. Perceptions were measured with five questions asking staff participants about their views and experiences of gender inequality and sexism at the university (Cronbach's alpha

=

.80). See Table 3 for gender inequality questions.

Table 3. Staff perceptions and experiences of gender inequality.

	All respondents[a] ($n =$ 499)	Female ($n =$ 340)	Male ($n =$ 152)	$\chi2$	Cramer's V
Thinks there is gender inequality in the university	40.5%	46.2%[b]	28.9%[b]	20.499***	.204
Has seen people treated unequally because of gender	25.3%	27.4%	20.4%	11.380**	.152
Knows of people treated unequally because of gender	33.7%	37.4%	25.7%	18.122***	.192
Has been treated unequally because of their gender	15.4%	18.2%	9.2%	10.456**	.146
Thinks there is institutional sexism at the university	23.4%	26.8%	16.4%	21.121***	.207

Participants could answer each query with a 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know' response.
Chi-square tests compared differences in frequency of 'yes' responses across female and male participants.
[a]Includes staff who reported their gender identity as 'Other'. [b] Significant post hoc test with Bonferonni corrections.
*p <

.05. **p <

.01. ***p <

.001

Quantitative data analysis

Survey data were collected via the online platform Qualtrics and analysed with the statistical software package SPSS 26. In this paper, we examined sexual harassment experiences, the characteristics of those experiences occurring on campuses, and perceptions and experiences of gender inequality.

Qualitative data analysis

A thematic analysis of the 17 staff interviews was undertaken exploring the themes of sexual harassment and gender inequality. These over-arching themes were used to create a broad coding matrix for analysing the transcripts, with codes added when new analytical sub-themes emerged. In practice, this meant that the research team coded the same batch of interviews then met to discuss emerging coding sub-themes, and through these discussions, the coding matrix evolved (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2016). Once all the transcripts were hand-coded, the data were uploaded to NVivo 11 software and coded within that.

Findings

Staff experiences of sexual harassment

Overall, 26.0% of staff participants (142 of 547) experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12

months. Analysis using a Pearson's Chi-square test showed that, unsurprisingly, women were significantly more likely than men to experience sexual harassment ($p <$

.001). This finding reflects wider population statistics on women's and men's experiences of sexual violence (WHO, 2017) and statistics on women's and men's experiences of sexual harassment in UK universities (UCU, 2016a). Over one-third (35.9%; 51 of 142) of staff participants reported that their experiences of sexual harassment occurred on the university campus, with 76.5% (39 of 51) experiencing unwanted sexual remarks and 70.6% (36 of 51) reporting someone staring at them in a way that made them uncomfortable. Over half of staff who experienced sexual harassment reported that someone tried draw them into a discussion about sexual matters (54.9%; 28 of 51) or cat-called them (54.9%; 28 of 51). Looking at this staff group in more depth, nearly all of the perpetrators were male (90.2%; 46 of 51); eight of 51 (15.7%) reported the perpetrator was a student; and 25 of 51 (49.0%) reported the perpetrator was a university colleague. Alison recalled a male colleague who, whilst co-teaching, '*made a veiled or not-so-veiled reference to spanking … and there was some sexual innuendo aimed at me*' and Fiona upon reporting being sexually harassed by a male colleague was told by her male manager to regard it '*as a compliment*'.

Over three-quarters of staff who experienced sexual harassment on the university campus reported that the perpetrator was more senior than they were (19 of 23; 82.6%). Examples

of sexual harassment by senior male colleagues were recounted by various participants, including Lucy whose supervisor told her '*that I used my breasts as a weapon*' in order to '*manipulate*' and '*seduce*'. Whilst it was singularly the women who were victims of sexual harassment, both the female and male participants witnessed it:

We [Graham and senior male colleague] were having a meeting during Open Day for the university and he said one of the reasons why he [colleague] was so keen to come was to come and look at all the beautiful young girls coming in to the Open Days in the university. (Graham)

Conducive context of the university

Whilst 4 in 10 staff participants (40.5%) thought there was gender inequality in their university, a Pearson Chi-square test showed that significantly more women than men thought this ($p <$

.001). One-third of staff participants (33.7%) knew of someone in their institution who was treated unequally because of their gender and one-quarter of staff (25.3%) witnessed someone being treated unequally because of their gender – and this was reported by both women and men.

However, when it came to personal experiences, nearly one in five (18.7%) female staff participants reported they were treated unequally because of their gender compared to only 9.2% of male staff. These quantitative findings showed that both female and male staff hold the view that there is gender inequality in their institution and that female staff report direct experiences of it. Supporting the quantitative findings is the qualitative data from interviews with women in a range of roles, when they were asked about their experiences of gender inequality. For example, Georgia commented that '*I quite often feel that the language that is used … its's very much diminishing the quality and perhaps the quantity of work that I've done*'. Lorna reflected on the ways in which she is compared to her male colleagues whose voice '*is heard slightly better than mine*' and Elaine recalled the ways in which women in committee meetings are '*talked over*' and their '*agenda items get bumped*' and when they do contribute, '*the men nod then they get back round to talking about things*'. Female staff participants also gave examples of workplace sexism reminiscent of a 1950s workroom: '*you're the only women amongst a bunch of men and it's assumed at a senior colleagues meeting she'll run off and get the tea, just because she's a women*' (Laura), or being referred to as a '*good girl*', being assigned administrative tasks, and being given general care work:

I have had experiences where I and other female members of staff are given certain types of jobs, like, always asked to take minutes. There are nine people round this table, one of them is a woman and you'll always look at me first. (Georgia)

Through these subtle and what some may perceive to be normative practices in universities, women's professional voice and presence were silenced and dismissed, effectively marginalizing and disempowering them in the university workplace. Their work tasks were consistent with stereotypical ideals of professional women, tasks that support men's work and advancement in universities. These experiences and messages were not restricted to women in Administrative and Professional Services as Georgia, one of the few

academics in the sample, described the same. Indeed, Emma described her experiences of marginalization and the impact of this gender regime that treats women as 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004; see also Ahmed, 2017) where they are encroaching into a community from which they are excluded:

there's always just this image of a bit of a boys' club, which isn't necessarily the same as 'lad's culture' … there's a 'boys' treehouse' feeling that you get. I always just feel like there was this 'no girl was allowed, boys' treehouse'. That 'lad culture' describes some of the uglier sides of that. You get phrases like the 'boys' club' which is a more genteel side of that. Fundamentally there's just, you do just get this idea that there is, you're just on the very edges of being unwelcome. (Emma)

This description of the 'boys club' illustrates how the gender regime functions in practice and works to reinforce women's position as interlopers. Women may be inside the institution but are marginalized within it: '*it just hits a level where it's like management just becomes males, where all the top jobs and all the top pay goes to guys*' (Emma).

Even the very initiatives that are implemented to tackle gender inequality such as Athena Swan are treated with derision by senior male academics who refer to it as the '*Tampons and Sanitary Towels Committee*' (Lucy). Graham, an official university 'champion' of the Athena Swan agenda, regards himself a supporter of gender equality despite revealing less than progressive views of women in the workplace: '*I think it's a psychological thing that if a woman gets a higher position then she becomes that sort of very defensive aggressive. You don't really want to work with them*'. It is incongruous to assume Athena Swan an effective instrument for dismantling entrenched gender inequality when its own 'champions' are the problem.

Invidious circle of gender inequality and sexual harassment

One characteristic of universities sustaining the gender regime and women's marginalized positions is precarious contracts. Georgia, refers to contract precarity as a barrier to female staff being able to challenge the sexually harassing behaviour of senior male staff: '*I know other female colleagues who haven't called people out on it because they're like, 'actually, that's the person who's going to have to renew our contract in six months' time*" (Georgia). The UCU (2016b) research found that when 'atypical' academic staff are factored in, 54% of all academic staff and 49% of all academic teaching staff are on insecure contracts and this prevalence of precarious contracts is a factor in both sexual harassment perpetration and protection.

The female staff in the institution are all too aware of how the gendered hierarchy protects abusive colleagues which also serves to maintain the culture. For example, Lorna explicates the way in which a senior male perpetrator used his position of power both to perpetrate and to protect himself:

… a professor in our department was very inappropriate with me, but again, I dealt with that myself … Although I was taken very by surprise, it was just him and I in my office when it happened, and I was taken very by surprise and as you kind of do, and because as well I'm an admin person, he's a professor and you feel that kind of, I've got to be careful, kind of thing. (Lorna)

Fiona also explores the ways in which the actual setting of the institution and the cultural norms create the conducive context for sexual harassment and for the protection of the harassers:

If I say that I'm not comfortable, what are the repercussions of that, because I have a senior member of staff in front of me.... You just question things in your head, you think - because my response to that in a different setting, like if I was out at a nightclub or a pub, I would bite back and put people in their place a little bit more in a social setting. I wouldn't put up with that kind of stuff. But in work you have this professional persona, you want to not cause any difficulty for yourself as much as possible. (Fiona)

This excerpt exposes the way in which sexual harassment and a hostile structure fails women in the workplace.

The resolution of the paradox

Based on this study's findings we concur with previous research that women, more than men, are subject to sexual harassment in the workplace and that senior male colleagues are often the perpetrators. What is more surprising, is that sexism and gender inequality is pervasive, explicit and remains deeply entrenched. Both gender inequality and sexual harassment are mutually constitutive and reinforcing and clearly demonstrate the tenacity of their interdependence as per the operationalization of the invidious circle (Burri & Alexandra, 2017). Our data contribute to the new discussions of sexual misconduct on campus but also offers a consideration of the ways in which sexual harassment forms and functions and of the university context that supports this. We argue that the paradox for women working in the university is illustrated by our admission to the institution being moderated by the roles we are permitted to operate at, and the threat and practice of sexual harassment to keep us there.

We concur with Hearn (1999) that cultural change is required at both the individual and institutional level: '*[t]o change women's position in universities and increase gender equality in universities necessitates changing men and men's position in universities and their cultures*' (Hearn, 1999, pg. 167). Only by dismantling the current gender regime can there be authentic culture change. These data illustrated that sexual harassment by men is not confined to the student body, that it is experienced by female staff members, and that sexual harassment is linked to gender inequality and together operate to form the conducive context that maintains this unequal gender regime (Kelly, 2007). Our ambition is two-fold: that this data be regarded as evidence for the critical scrutiny of universities; and that it is used to consider how to disrupt the invidious circle that maintains gendered inequalities and protects the sexual harassment of female staff.

Study limitations

As with every study, there were several limitations in this study. First, human resources sent out recruitment advertisements that effectively asked staff participants to be whistleblowers, exposing sexual harassment by colleagues. There is very little documentation about staff experiences of sexual harassment in universities because, as Page and colleagues argue (2019: pg. 1313): '[t]here is tension in the fact that although

universities specialize in carrying out research, we have not been putting our collective expertise to bear on this issue in our own sector'. Page and colleagues (2019) also emphasize that participants put themselves and their careers at great risk when exposing this type of wrongdoing and thus the staff participants made a positive decision to share their views and experiences of their own institution. Second, more female staff than male staff participated in the study. The research topic influences recruitment, in which those who find the topic more relevant and important to their lives are more likely to participate (Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000). Women are more likely to experience the forms of gender-based violence investigated in this study so it comes as no surprise that more female staff than male staff and students completed the survey and took part in interviews. The higher proportion of women in this study may have influenced the findings. Whilst this study has limitations, the wider evidence on gender pay gaps and structural inequalities combined with the growing number of studies of sexual misconduct in universities suggest that this institution is not atypical.

Conclusion

The incremental progression of women into academia, as both students and staff, has disrupted, but not dismantled, cultures and practices of gender inequality. In fact, women have succeeded despite these obstacles. It is imperative to understand how gender dynamics and experiences of sexual harassment operate within universities because policy development, prevention campaigns and interventions to tackle sexual misconduct in the academy, however welcomed, will never be fully realized without this knowledge (Donaldson, McCarry, & McGoldrick, 2018). This article contributes to the wider body of work on sexual misconduct on campus, but takes it further by considering a new way to theorize this through applying Kelly's conducive context framework (2007) and application of the invidious circle (Burri & Alexandra, 2017). There is growing acknowledgement that organizations and employers have a responsibility and duty of care to prevent and respond to all forms of sexual misconduct effectively, and maintain the safety and well-being of their communities. The prevalence of sexual harassment can no longer be characterized or individualized as a student issue or the behaviour of a bad employee. Neither can the entrenched gender inequalities in roles, seniority and pay any longer be dismissed as individual failings or lack of ambition. Instead, both require an examination at the institutional level and a coordinated structural response.

The assimilationist project of permitting women entry to the academy has brought incalculable benefits to women, men and wider society. We hope our contribution enhances understanding of the dynamics of sexual harassment in universities so that academic institutions become exemplars of equal practice rather than sites of paradox.

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