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Breaking through the glass ceiling: Experiences of academic women who have advanced to leadership roles in tertiary education in New Zealand

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Breaking through the glass ceiling: Experiences of academic women who have advanced to leadership roles in tertiary education in New Zealand

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Abstract
Recent data shows a continuing trend of gender disparity in leadership positions in tertiary education in New Zealand with men dominating higher levels of employment and advancing at faster rates than women. This study explored the experiences of six academic women who have advanced to leadership roles in New Zealand to examine the role that gender plays in their career progression. It found a range of gendered experiences including negative incidents of sexism and obstacles to advancing. There were also stories of positive experiences of supportive work environments and initiatives such as mentoring that have aided them to gain leadership positions. Participants recognised the complexity of gender issues acknowledging the range of factors and perceptions that influence their experiences in academia.

Keywords*: leadership; gender; women in academia; gender; tertiary education*

Introduction

There has been a lot written about the glass ceiling—a metaphorical limit to women's professional success that blocks women advancing to senior positions (Jahaur & Lau, 2018). While some women do advance, there continues to be an underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in tertiary education in New Zealand. Although women comprise approximately 42% of full-time academic staff in New Zealand, this figure is misleading; women dominate the lower levels of the academic scale with the number of men increasing as the pay and status of roles increase (Walker et al., 2020). Recent figures show that men comprise 64-69% of associate professor/Head of Department (HOD) and 74–81% of professors/deans (Human Rights Commission, 2012; Walker et al., 2020). This is despite equal numbers of female students completing doctoral degrees (48% in 2002, 51% in 2017) and therefore, not a pipeline issue of inferior postgraduate completion rates or an inadequate number of qualified women (Education Counts, 2020).

Beyond numerical representation, there are issues with gender disparity in pay, research funding, citation rates, and rates of advancement which are well documented in international and New Zealand literature (Arnsperger et al., 2019; Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Brower & James, 2020; Jonsen et al., 2010; Kloot, 2004; Walker et al., 2020). Brower and James' (2020) study documented a $400,000 gender pay gap in New Zealand over an academic's lifetime and found men's odds

of being ranked as professor or associate professor are double women's. Additionally, women were found to be promoted at slower rates than men even when their research scores were higher (Brower and James, 2020). Walker et al. (2020) corroborate these findings showing that women in New Zealand universities are more likely to be employed part-time, at lower levels of seniority and advance more slowly. An international study on citation rates found an underrepresentation of female authorship with fewer articles published by women and male authors cited more frequently in journals (Bendels et al., 2018).

Several reasons are presented to explain gender disparity in leadership positions. One argument is that gender stereotyping based on role congruity theory limits women's access to and success in leadership roles. Role congruity assigns communal attributes to women of being a mother and caregiver; being sensitive, helpful and nurturing while men are credited with agentic attributes; being confident, assertive, competitive, rational and task oriented (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, women are channelled into particular fields and roles based on their natural suitability and are seen to be less competent and unsuited to leadership (Jonsen et al., 2010). Although the trait model of leadership has been widely debunked, perceptions of societal gender roles remain which influence the masculine characterisation of leadership (Blackmore, 1989; Jonsen et al., 2010).

Another explanation is institutional discrimination in hiring and selection practices. Literature shows that when recruiting, positions are framed for a specific profile, gender bias is evident in the interviewing process and evaluation of attributes, and there is a tendency to hire those who most fit the dominant culture (Blackmore, 2010a; Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2013). Universities commonly utilise informal hiring procedures where candidates are identified and encouraged to apply through professional contacts disadvantaging those who lack an organisational network (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Jauhar & Lau, 2018). However, the complexity of this issue is also shown in one US study that identified the strongest candidate was selected 95% of the time regardless of gender (Ceci & Williams, 2015). It concluded that in this university's science faculty gender did not influence hiring practices; women were hired when they were viewed as being equally or more accomplished than male candidates (Ceci & Williams, 2015). Recruitment practices are complex, and more research is needed to understand how gender influences organisational hiring practices for leadership positions.

A third argument commonly presented is women's personal choices and family responsibilities that limit their advancement to leadership roles. The early years of a woman's academic career when the highest research output is expected coincides with childbearing years and time taken for maternity leave (Currie & Thiele, 2001). Reduced research output and promotional opportunities are then compounded by family and domestic responsibilities throughout a women's career with a higher number of women employed part-time (Walker et al., 2020). A UK study found evidence of the widespread belief that women still assume the majority of

family and household responsibilities which had a detrimental effect on their academic progression (Forster, 2001). Another study showed women's domestic work crosses over into the professional sphere as "academic housework" with women assuming chores in the workplace attributed to their natural ability (Heijstra et al., 2017). Universities' organisational culture of competition exacerbates these issues by seemingly valuing the childless profile and incentivising time spent on academic work and research despite the development of more work/life balance policies (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2017).

When women do advance to leadership positions, research has shown some factors have aided their progression with the most commonly referenced initiatives of mentoring and leadership programmes. The New Zealand Universities Women in Leadership (NZUWiL) programme has a specific focus on women's professional development to increase leadership numbers (Universities New Zealand, 2020). One study evaluated the course's success by surveying participants three years post completion finding that it helped to increase participants' self-confidence and networking opportunities (Harris & Leberman, 2012). Similarly, mentoring has been shown to give awareness to opportunities, develop career pathways, help with learning how to navigate the system that presents challenges to women and increase self-efficacy which supports leadership aspirations (Airini et al., 2011; Arnsperger et al., 2019).

The majority of the literature on gender in academia is from the dominant perspective of highlighting obstacles and women's negative experiences. Emphasising negative experiences ignores the success stories and initiatives that could potentially have a greater impact on women's advancement. Additionally, focusing on the numerical representation of women simplifies the issue and trivialises the challenges that women face to merely increasing numbers. A recent shift towards research that is positively framed is reflected in the approach of one New Zealand based study by Airini et al. (2011) which explored factors that both helped and hindered women's advancement. Their qualitative study found that women in New Zealand tertiary institutes reported three times more incidents that helped their careers (74%) rather than hindered them (26%) (Airini et al., 2011). This shift in discourse has been missing in most of the literature on the topic to date. The following small-scale study adds to the limited literature that investigates positive and negative gender experiences to provide a more balanced view and hear the voices of those that are within the system that are challenging it to overcome gender disparity in academia.

Method

This study utilised semi-structured interviews to answer the research question: *What are the experiences of academic women who advance to leadership roles in tertiary education in New Zealand?* The participants were six women currently in academic leadership positions in tertiary institutes in New Zealand. Candidates were identified by an online search of public websites of New Zealand tertiary institutes. Twelve candidates were randomly selected to be invited; eight

responded to participate; six were selected. The participants were from different faculties across three of New Zealand's eight universities, were in roles including being dean, head of school and/or head of department, and were ranged in age. To maintain the participants' confidentiality, the specific job title and name of the university have not been provided and participants are identified in the findings as Participant 1 to Participant 6.

Interviews were selected as the data collection method to provide rich and detailed qualitative data to understand participants' personal experiences and thoughts, and the meaning they make of their experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions, were conducted face-to-face where possible or otherwise online, and were sound recorded and transcribed. The data were coded for thematic analysis following the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), using both inductive and deductive approaches. The inductive approach was used first to ensure the codes were data-driven and then re-coded using a deductive approach to link the data to the research question. The inductive approach was prioritised to ensure that the data collected were not biased by the research question and that the data reflected participants' responses accurately. Codes were categorised into themes where main themes and sub themes were identified based on frequency they appeared in the dataset, relevance to the research question and the importance of the theme based on the researcher's judgement. Themes had to be generic enough to recognise the differences in the dataset so that the full range of responses was presented. This analysis took a semantic level approach where themes were identified based on surface level meaning of the data and were then interpreted to find patterns across the dataset.

This study was evaluated using a peer-review process where the possibility of harm to participants, privacy and confidentiality, and possible conflicts of interests were considered prior to conducting the study. Ethical processes followed guidelines according to the *Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants* and the study was deemed to be low risk (Massey University, 2017).

Findings and discussion

The interview data showed a range of gendered experiences for these women in academia in New Zealand. The participants experienced incidents of gender bias and for some, more explicit sexism which varied depending on the faculty and the individuals in leadership. While these experiences were mixed, two main factors were seen to be obstacles to advancing: discriminatory employment practices and unequal work/life balance. On the positive side, mentoring and leadership programmes for women were aids to advancing. Once in leadership roles, the participants expressed a variety of ways they are helping more women to advance within their departments. Finally, all participants acknowledged the complexity of gender issues in their institutions by identifying ways that gender experiences intersect with other social and cultural phenomena. These results are discussed in more depth.

Academic women's experiences vary depending on faculty environment

The experiences of advancing to leadership roles for the six women in this study varied depending on the environment within their faculties. Two women reported experiencing a positive working culture for women with a balance of men and women in leadership roles and a supportive environment that was aware of gender and diversity. One participant identified the role the dean plays in creating a positive environment:

> *I think it would be very different if we had a different dean in the faculty. Our dean is incredibly supportive and compassionate; he has high expectations but is very supportive and very aware of equity issues and power dynamics. That has made an enormous difference because I feel really supported and safe to go about the work and take risks and I know that if someone is pushing back or being sexist that he would fully have my back.* (Participant 4)

The other four participants reported workplace environments that were unaware of gender biases, failed to address these in a meaningful way, and lacked gender diversity. One participant was the first female HOD in her faculty, another was currently the only female HOD; they reported a lack of women across all levels of senior academic staff and leadership with Participant 6 saying of her previous institute, "it's not like there weren't women there who ought to have been professors, it was just you couldn't get promoted…. Just trying to get ahead there, you see the men pass you by."

These four participants that experienced a negative gendered working environment all worked within Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) faculties and while it cannot be generalised from this small-scale study, it is well documented that STEM faculties have greater gender bias and suffer more gender stereotypes than other subject areas (Robnett, 2016; Yang & Carroll, 2016). Robnett's study (2016) also found that the consequences of gender bias in STEM fields are lessened when women have a supportive peer network.

While results from this study suggest some individuals had a significant impact on whether these participants progressed in their careers, it was not clear in this study what the link is between institutionalised gender bias and individual-level sexism. The findings also suggest that organisational policies have little impact if not promoted by those in leadership roles since experiences varied for three participants from within one university. Therefore, future interventions that aim to reduce gender bias need to target the factors that contribute to a negative gendered working environment as well as to build a more inclusive climate collaborating with male and female peers.

Navigating negative behaviour

Despite two participants reporting overall positive experiences, all of the participants experienced dealing with negative, sexist behaviour from male colleagues and managers throughout their academic careers. These instances covered experiences of being talked down to or talked over,

being ignored when voicing their opinion, experiencing sexist jokes, perceptions of resentment when women were promoted ahead of men and one case of sexual harassment. Participants detailed the ways they learned to deal with negative behaviour by using avoidance tactics, learning to speak up for themselves, learning to be resilient and enacting tactics to prevent being seen as a troublemaker.

While there is a lack of research on the effect of sexism in the workplace culture on women advancing, research on gender microaggression supports some of the subtle sexist experiences of these participants with examples of common verbal or behavioural insults that communicate sexist beliefs towards women (Lewis, 2018). These less visible forms of sexism are shown in the findings of this study with participants sharing incidents of experiencing invisibility when their contributions were not recognised, assumptions of inferiority, and sexist humour that reinforced gender stereotypes. Potentially of more concern is the trend that these experiences were not reported by these women, as organisational power structures often do not provide realistic avenues for women to pursue concerns. Organisational silencing was documented in a study by Fernando and Prasad (2018) who detailed the negative consequences and personal costs for those who challenge the system. In their research, women who voiced their concerns were silenced by third-party actors and consequently, endured negative experiences for fear of being labelled a troublemaker (Fernando & Prasad, 2018). Academic career structures are heavily influenced by sponsorship with often few vacancies in highly specialised roles, which increases the influence of senior individuals and the importance of seeming to be the right fit to advance.

Since research shows women are unlikely to report microaggressions in the workplace, they evoke strategies to deal with these negative experiences. Three participants identified a particular man that had held them back in their careers or had been an obstacle to them advancing. They explained ways in which they needed to go around this person; one participant decided to leave the department, and another left the institute entirely to find a more supportive culture. One participant equated being a woman in academia to a tax that is unfairly placed on women to do their jobs:

> *I think to do the leadership stuff I've done as a woman you do have to work twice as hard as a man. You can't coast on anything. There's no room for error, you're open to criticism. If you do something wrong, you're never going to get away with it, people will always have an opinion…. I think how we get treated by men in the workplace is an additional tax and is something that we always have to think about…. It is this endless torrent of maleness in academia that is just so unfair, and it holds people back. Why should we have to put up with that to do our jobs?* (Participant 6)

Participants in this study expressed how they learned to be resilient to deal with negative, sexist behaviour which unfairly puts the onus back on women to adapt to the system and not on those that are responsible for creating those conditions.

Obstacles to advancement to leadership roles in tertiary education

i. Employment practices

One common theme that spanned several universities and different faculties was recruitment processes that were perceived to be unequal or lacking transparency, and candidates being shoulder tapped to advance to leadership roles. Half of the participants got their current positions through being shoulder tapped and these same participants said that the recruitment process in their departments was not transparent with openings for roles not advertised internally:

> *The recruitment process is not particularly transparent; you don't really know when positions are coming up. There's definitely a situation where someone in the head position looks at the spreadsheet of who is available and it's like a Rubik's cube, just kind of move people around. It's definitely done on the basis of prudency, where we know that this person can do the job, they have the skills, they're a no-brainer as opposed to "this person could be really great, if we gave that person the right support." There's not a lot of that, there is a risk averse approach.* (Participant 5)

Comments by participants regarding prudency expose an attitude which assumes that hiring a woman is riskier than a man, shows an affinity to male leadership, and the use of continual fixed-term contracts are shown to disadvantage women more than men (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2013).

There was also recognition from the participants that shoulder tapping resulted in the same type of people being in leadership roles; "there is a little bit of a pattern of the same people being asked again and again which is not necessarily good for younger colleagues" (Participant 1) and "when the previous Head [of Department] moved away and they immediately appointed a colleague of mine, a senior, late 60s, male, it made me think 'is there ever going to be a woman in this role, is there ever going to be one other than the obvious cluster of guys?'" (Participant 5). It is well documented that hiring procedures that are not transparent and practices of shoulder-tapping result in a tendency to hire those that fit the dominant culture and disadvantage those lacking organisational networks as shown by numerous other studies (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Jauhar & Lau, 2018; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2013).

ii. Work/life balance

Another example of obstacles for women in academia was in their lack of work/life balance and heavy workload. All participants highlighted workload and said that individuals in the tertiary system can advance at a faster rate based on a higher output of research and increased workload. Participant 3 explained it as a "system that somewhat incentivises you will get promoted faster if you hit those metrics faster…. I feel like it's getting better but when you are rewarding people essentially on the amount of what you do, not the quality of what you do, it's hard." Those with children and family responsibilities noted they were less able to publish in high quantities which

made advancing more difficult. Participant 3 identified that she believes women in academia take on extra workload with pastoral care of students and more "housework," particularly if there is a gender imbalance in teaching staff:

> *There is always that undertone that women end up doing the housework, whether that's actually physically dealing with functions or whether that's a lot of the pastoral care that goes on. We have a lot of structures around student pastoral care but at the end of the day students will talk to whoever they're comfortable with*. (Participant 3)

This additional pastoral care that some women academics assume in their roles in tertiary education aligns with literature on gender stereotypes that shows attributes assigned to women cross over to the workplace where women take on "mothering" roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jonsen et al., 2010). Although academic workload is similar regardless of gender, women are disadvantaged as it is widely shown that women still assume the majority of family and domestic responsibilities impacting on their ability to publish research at the same rate as men (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2017; Forster, 2001; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). Additionally, the phenomenon of housework crossing into academic life, with tasks that are undervalued and earmarked for women, negatively affects women's academic careers (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2017).

Aids to advancement

i. Mentoring

All participants highlighted the importance of mentors to help advance their careers. Mentoring was shown to be important for career advice, to learn how to negotiate and be strategic with career decisions as well as mentoring with teaching. Two participants who expressed a positive gender balance in their faculties identified female mentors who had been significant in their careers while the other four participants all mentioned male mentors. While mentors were identified to be a significant advantage to advance, the lack of female mentors was expressed negatively by Participant 3:

> *I'd love to say that there were these amazing women who helped me, who opened up the doors, but it hasn't been like that. I think the resources for women have been scarce, scarcer than for men. When you're in an environment of scarcity or austerity, you tend to be a little less generous or less supportive than one would like to imagine you would be.*

The importance of mentoring is highlighted in the literature as being valuable to understand and navigate organisational politics and career pathways (Airini et al., 2011; Arnsperger & Robles, 2019; Roberts, 2017). A repeated concept in the literature is that women are unlikely to pursue advancement on their own which stresses the importance of the mentoring relationship to have

greater access to opportunities (Roberts, 2017). It is clear from these participants that having mentors has been significant for their career progression. However, the literature is limited on the gender relationship of mentor to mentee, with these findings suggesting that the gender of the mentor does not decrease the value that this relationship provides. Conversely, it was implied by two participants in this study that a female mentor would have been preferred since cross-gender mentoring can lack an understanding of the challenges that are specific to women in academia (Roberts, 2017). Perhaps this is where redressing numbers of women in leadership is valuable to provide a larger pool of potential women leaders to become mentors.

ii. Leadership programmes

Two thirds of the participants identified leadership programmes as aids to their career advancement. These included programmes that were run within the university and the national NZUWiL programme with some participants having attended several courses. The usefulness of these programmes was multifaceted; they support development of practical skills to help develop leadership skills, get support, help with networking with other women and hearing first-hand experiences from other senior women. While little research has been done on NZUWiL or other university led leadership programmes for women, one study by Harris and Leberman (2012) reported similar findings to this study that the programme was beneficial to increase self-confidence, help with networking and forming professional relationships.

However, perhaps the most overlooked value of such programmes is they legitimise issues that women face in academia and are an attempt to address these.

> *I think one of the things generally about that course is that it shows that someone cares about the status of women in the university sector, the fact that it exists, that alone is good. It just signals to people like me that it does matter how many of us are in leadership roles. Doing these jobs does matter, it does create visibility for women in academia, that we can have an influence and an effect.* (Participant 6)

Yet, both mentoring and leadership programmes for women are criticised for making senior women responsible for helping junior women succeed within the same conditions of inequity and does little to challenge the pre-existing power structures (Walker et al., 2020). It is perhaps due to this lack of disruption that both initiatives are widely used in tertiary education in New Zealand and for more meaningful change, other initiatives need to be utilised in conjunction with mentoring to challenge the academic system.

Using leadership positions to help other women succeed

Participants in this study recognised that more needs to be done for women academics and are using their leadership role to propose positive changes to encourage and support other women within their field of influence.

> *I think you can't just become one of the blokes when you're in a leadership position as a woman. You can't just settle down into that and think "the system has worked for me, now we'll just ride it while it lasts" because that's regressive. But it's finding the ways that you can be effective rather than just being the mouthy one around the table, there are ways that you can be really effective and advocate for change and I'm figuring that out.* (Participant 5)

Three women discussed the ways that they are creating flexible work schedules and helping staff take time out for maternity leave. Three others discussed supporting female staff by having conversations about their career directions and providing information on courses, seminars and professional development programmes. Participants acknowledged that these factors of parental leave, flexible hours and professional development were universal for both male and female staff; however, some participants admitted they do extra for women based on their own experiences:

> *I feel like I click more with the women, just because of the journey I've been through and because I still feel there are not sufficient women who advance. Obviously, I have male doctorate students as well, maybe I feel like I'm putting in the extra mile for females.* (Participant 2)

Interestingly, this finding goes against literature on role congruity theory, which argues that women in positions of power conform to stereotypical norms of behaviour which obstruct other women from advancing (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jonsen et al., 2010). The participants in this study are finding ways to work within the system to use their power to subvert behavioural norms and to advance diversity in their faculties. This behaviour is supported by a study that shows underrepresented faculty staff play a disproportionate role in advancing diversity by engaging more in inclusion activities largely based on their moral obligation and their desire for role models (Jimenez et al., 2019). Hearing how women find ways to negotiate challenges presented by the academic system is useful to raise awareness so institutions can consider ways to support their women leaders. They are correctly positioned to be change agents, not only by being role models, but also by understanding gender issues from both sides and showing how leadership can be done differently.

Complexity of gender experiences in tertiary education

Although findings from this small-scale study suggest that gender impacts career advancement in New Zealand universities, participants recognised that their experiences cannot only be attributed to gender without considering other socio-cultural factors and perceptions.

Participants 1 and 4 discussed how gender and diversity intersect detailing incidents they saw of ethnicity being prioritised above gender in recruitment in an attempt to have more Māori and Pasifika staff. This is attributed to the underrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika scholars in New Zealand universities, which was approximately five per cent of the total academic staff in all eight universities in 2017 (McAllister et al., 2019). While some progress has been made to increase

the number of female senior academics in New Zealand, it needs to be recognised that this has not been a universal benefit for non-pākehā women and more work is needed in this area to ensure that progress encompasses those with multiple identities (Walker et al., 2020).

Two participants discussed how gender and age are interconnected with gender difficulties worse for those who appear younger:

> *I've always looked young so there is also ageism there as well. As I age it has got a bit better with being taken more seriously, not getting talked down to, people not assuming that I'm a student.* (Participant 6)

> *In the early part of my career, I felt like people often thought I was younger than I was, and some people have a perception of young woman in leadership roles. I feel like… it's still blatantly there, the kind of "oh you're just a young thing, you're not ready for this."* (Participant 4)

The women in this study recognised that gender issues in academia were multifaceted and could not be reduced to purely obstacles to advancement. Participant 6 mentioned a study of lower citation rates of women in scientific journals as an example of how gender bias is wider and more complex than correcting hiring practices. Participant 5 mentioned issues of class and gender and when there is an attempt to recognise gender issues, these are often trivialised. She gave an example of a university workshop where a guest speaker spoke about household chores to help women professionally:

> *I know that women carry the majority of the housework and the cognitive administration stuff, there is no question about that but getting tips from very affluent women about services that are available was embarrassing because for most women in that room it was not their lives. I think we have to move beyond practical tips about good housekeeping to some culture change so that women are not spending five years longer than they have to preparing for a promotion.* (Participant 5)

The participants viewed gender within a wider socio-cultural context where women are impacted professionally based on gendered social norms. This was evident by comments that recognised gender bias as woven into the fabric of society. Participant 4 articulated the prevalence of gender issues across all areas of society as:

> *I think it doesn't even come down to that moment of "should we appoint a man or a woman for this position?" It's often so structured into the fabric way before that, that it makes the man look like a better candidate because of the level of success that he may have had because of the other barriers that weren't there…. But it's all kinds of messages that they've [women] got in a thousand different ways leading up to that point where they may not even be at the table for the committee to have that decision.*

Solutions?

The women in this study suggested that to move forward and effect meaningful change the conversation of gender diversity in academia needs to be expanded to understand how gender perceptions in society affect women more generally. Walker et al. (2020) have added to this by stressing that universities must consider diversity more broadly to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of those that intersect with multiple identities. There is a need to think more holistically about diversity to include gender, as well as recognising and including multiple identities across ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability.

Some participants identified that men are needed to be involved in addressing the range of issues that women face in their careers. This idea that men can be allies in making meaningful change for women is also discussed by Veer et al. (2021) looking at the role of men in the post #MeToo era. It can be seen as a double-edged sword with it potentially being inappropriate if men engage in pro-feminist debate while male allies are also needed to advance women's causes (Veer et al., 2021). As suggested in the findings of this study, individuals are key to creating a supportive environment and male allies can create awareness of and de-normalise cultural norms that negatively affect women.

Feminist discourse argues for a refocusing away from numerical representation of women to restructuring the patterns of inequality socially, politically and culturally that limit women in the educational system (Blackmore, 2013). Although the solution to gender disparity is outside the scope of these findings, they suggest that to address the negative gendered experiences in academia a cultural change is needed that includes targeted programmes and mentoring but widens the scope to address the culture of tertiary education in New Zealand to challenge attitudes and the beliefs that create bias (Blackmore, 2010b; Roberts, 2017).

Conclusions

Limitations and further research

The limited number of participants and limited selection of New Zealand universities mean the findings of this study cannot be generalised for all academic women's experiences. It is also recognised that those that volunteered for this study may have a higher prevalence of negative experiences which motivated their participation. This study gives an insight into how this group of women experience gender, but more research is needed to determine how the environment of each tertiary institute affects women's progression to leadership roles.

This researcher recognises the multiple expressions of gender and the oversimplicity of naming women as a homogenous group; however, it was outside the scope of this study to analyse the experiences within a population group. Therefore, more research is needed into what aids women to progress and to identify whether these aids are different for sub-groups. Additionally, further research into how women use their power to challenge the system to

benefit other women is important to gain a better understanding of the changes that are needed in tertiary education.

Summary

This study highlighted that gender affects women's experiences in advancing to leadership roles in tertiary education in New Zealand. While there were some positive experiences of a supportive academic environment and evidence of programmes like mentoring that have helped these women, all participants experienced negative incidents that they related to being a woman. Although numbers both internationally and in New Zealand indicate gains towards more gender balance, this is not across all levels of employment and ignores the gendered environment that women experience as told in these stories. This research can support other studies in raising awareness and help to shape the current understanding of the role of gender in tertiary education.

It is crucial that a different lens is used in research on gender to highlight women's positive experiences and the factors that have aided advancement. Repeating studies on the obstacles for women produces similar results and change has been slow to address these issues. Therefore, shifting the focus to women's positive experiences changes the perspective on the way women's issues are viewed. Since women already attempt to use their power in subtle ways to challenge the system, women should be given more of a voice to establish policies around equity, employment practices and professional development.

Hearing these experiences of academic women who have advanced to leadership roles is vital to understand what can be done to advocate for change to address gender disparity. Only by understanding what creates supportive workplace environments and positive experiences for women can more work be done to provide equal opportunities and pathways for more women to gain leadership roles in New Zealand. The way forward requires challenging the academic system that creates the conditions for gender disparity as well as including mechanisms to embrace inclusion and diversity. While targeted programmes are useful, they need to be combined with more cultural and structural change to address perceptions of gender roles. Only then can the path be clear for more diverse leaders in tertiary education in New Zealand.

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