

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Social Work Education* on 23 Jan 2020, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02615479.2020.1715934>.

Title Page

Navigating the Gendered Academy: Women in Social Work Academia

Accepted by *Social Work Education. The International Journal*, 8th January 2020

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Keywords

social work academy; gender in social work; gender in HE; women in social work; women in
the academy; women in social work education

Navigating the Gendered Academy: Women in Social Work Academia

Abstract

Women fare less well than men across *all* academic disciplines: they are less likely to be promoted, they earn less, and many more professors are men. There has, however, been little analysis to date of the experience of women in social work education, a discipline that has historically had higher representation of female staff and students. This study set out to explore women in the social work academy through a case-study of social work education in Scotland. A mixed methods approach was used, including a review of relevant literature; an online survey of women and men academics in social work education; and semi-structured interviews with female social work leaders, past and present. The study found that women in the social work academy faced the same pressures as other women in higher education; some of these pressures were also shared by men. Most significant, however, was the extent to which women in social work academia experienced twin challenges, firstly, as female academics and secondly, as female social work academics in a discipline that struggles for recognition in the academy. We conclude that this makes for a contradictory and, at times, ambiguous experience for women as they navigate the gendered academy. (199)

Introduction

The subject of women in the academy (that is, the experience of women who work in teaching and research posts in universities) was first brought to light over thirty years ago, and has re-emerged at regular intervals ever since (e.g. Acker & Piper, 1984; Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Caplan, 1993; Morley, 1994; Valian, 1998; Husu, 2001; Kearney, 2001; Knights &

Richards, 2003; Thomas, 2004; Periera, 2017; Murgia & Poggio, 2018). Recent studies demonstrate that while women outnumber men in most universities, gender differences continue to exist across salary, rank and duties (e.g. Atkin & Vicars, 2016; David, 2015; Gee & Norton, 2009; Gutgold & Linse, 2016; Murgia & Poggio, 2018). Cultural, economic and social barriers remain for women (Kandiko Howson *et al.*, 2018); for women of colour and women with disabilities these are acute and long-reaching (Anderson & Williams, 2001; Davies *et al.*, 1994; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Walsh & Morley, 2005). Additionally, pressures to perform, publish, meet funding targets and score highly in student satisfaction surveys also discriminate against women (Kandiko Howson *et al.*, 2018; Murgia & Poggio, 2018; Taylor & Lahad, 2018). Given that this is the 'big picture', how does it translate to women's experience in a historically female-dominated subject such as social work education? Although there has been some research on women in the 'female' disciplines of nurse and teacher education (e.g. Glass, 2007; McGuire & Weiner, 1994), there has been surprisingly little exploration of women in the social work academy. This paper introduces one recent project that examines this issue, turning the spotlight on Scottish social work education as a case-study example. We begin by offering a brief overview of the research evidence, quantitative and qualitative, on gender at work and gender in the academy, before turning to what is known about gender in social work and gender in social work education. Following this, we outline the approach and methods adopted in our own study, and go on to present our findings, focusing in this paper on the online survey data, with supporting evidence from the interviews. (A further paper will return to the interview data in due course.) We conclude by offering some general reflections and conclusions.

Evidence from the literature and research

Gender at work and gender at work in higher education (HE)

It is almost 50 years since the UK government passed the 1970 Equal Pay Act, making it illegal to pay women and men differently for the same work. Disability discrimination legislation in 1995 sought to similarly challenge disability-related discrimination, and both were brought together under a new comprehensive Equality Act in England, Scotland and Wales in 2010, along with other protected characteristics such as race and sexuality. Legislation has not, however, solved the issue of gender inequality in the workforce. For example, in 2018, only 8% of all large firms in the UK (those with more than 250 employees) reported no pay gap; 78% reported a pay gap in favour of men (House of Commons, 2018). Not only were many more men found to be working at senior positions in organisations, but different occupations and part-time roles were found to be predominantly female. In other words, both vertical and horizontal segregation remain a constant feature.

Higher education is no exception to this. *Advance HE's* (2018) report shows that 55.4% of academic staff were male; 44.6% were female. Examined more closely, it transpired that women were more likely than men to be in 'teaching only' positions (52.0 to 48.0%) and less likely to be in 'research only' posts (46.7 to 53.2%). Additionally, they were less likely to have open-ended, permanent contracts (61.5 to 66.5%); were more likely to work part-time (53.8 to 46.2%); and were much less likely to be professors (only 22.4% to men's 77.6%). In summary, HE, like the rest of the UK workforce, is segregated both hierarchically and vertically. So what about social work and more specifically, the social work academy?

Gender in social work and gender in the social work academy

Social work has traditionally been seen as a 'female profession', although it is widely acknowledged that there have always been more men than women at higher levels (Howe, 1986; Kadushin, 1976; Stromberg, 1988; Walton 1975). Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) statistics illustrate this in action. Overall, 85% of those working in the social service workforce in Scotland in 2016 were women; 15% were men. In some categories, such as children's services, the discrepancy was even higher, with 96% of day-carers being women. Only residential child care and offender services had a more gender balanced workforce (with 69% women as compared with 31% men).ⁱ The picture of men in management in social work looks very different, however. At first glance, figures are encouraging; women made up 85% of managers in 2015, as compared with 15% of men. But examined more carefully, Directors/Heads of Service were still overwhelmingly men (58% as compared with 42% women, a very high figure given the small percentage of men in social work across the board).ⁱⁱ

It is more difficult to pin down gender ratios within the social work academy. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) only treated 'social work & social policy' as a separate category in its data collection for the first time in 2016. At that time, women made up 64% of academic staff as compared with 46% of men. Given that this categorisation was new, however, we cannot make any comparisons over time. Furthermore, 'social work & social policy' figures were not disaggregated, making it impossible to draw conclusions about 'social work' as a discipline in its own right. (Our own study does, however, provide information about gender in the Scottish social work education workforce.)

Qualitatively, the evidence about gender in the social work academy is patchy at best. A journal article written 20 years ago offers a reflexive, autobiographical account of being a social work academic in Scotland. Cree (1997) argues that gender impacts on all areas of academic life, from the university level right down to the individual student-tutor relationship. She reaches an ambivalent conclusion that acknowledges both the complexity and contradiction in being a social work academic; social work education was a setting in which women could thrive, while at the same time, it was a context of continued disparity, if not downright discrimination. Later research on women in the social work academy in North America echoes this study. Sakamoto *et al.*'s (2008) US study identified gender differences across many aspects of social work education, including pay, rank, job duties and tenure.

The 'Women in the Social Work Academy' study: research design and methodology

Our study began with a key underlying assumption, that by researching academic women in one conventionally female-dominated context, we might learn more about the conditions that aid or hinder women's position in the academy more generally. The social work academy in Scotland offered a useful case-study example (Yin, 2013); social work programmes are located in HEIs with very different histories and priorities, thus giving us the opportunity to potentially uncover different perspectives on the same issue. We hoped that the findings from our study might inform future practice in advancing equality and diversity in the academy. The study asked three main questions:

1. What was the position of academic women in social work education in universities in Scotland?
2. How did academic women themselves experience being and working in the social work academy in Scotland?

3. What might the implications be for both social work education and the academic community more broadly?

In order to address these questions, we firstly sought information on the demographic make-up of the social work academy in Scotland, gathering data from heads of subject in each of the eight higher education institutions that ran social work programmes in relation to the numbers, gender and job title of their academic social work staff.ⁱⁱⁱ We established that there were 135 staff employed as social work academics in Scotland at the census point (November 2017). Of this total, 78 (58%) were women, and 57 (42%) were men. In spite of women's greater participation overall, of the 10 Professors of Social Work in Scotland, men outnumbered women by 6 to 4. Additionally, researcher posts, which are traditionally most precarious in universities (tied as they often are to research grants), were predominantly held by women. These overall figures gave us a baseline from which we could assess the representativeness of our own findings. Thereafter, we used a concurrent mixed methods design built around an online survey of *all* social work academics and qualitative interviews with women academics only; data from the survey and the interviews were used to support the overall analysis (Cresswell, 2009).

Online survey

Our initial proposal had been to invite only women academics to complete our online survey. This idea was quickly abandoned in favour of running a survey that would allow us to compare and contrast the expressed views of women and men. We therefore carried out an online survey (using the Bristol Online Survey tool)^{iv} of *all* social work academics in Scotland, advertising the survey on Twitter and inviting Heads of Social Work to forward the link to their

staff-members. The survey, which included both open and closed questions, sought information on demographics, career history, range of duties, experience of caring responsibilities and views on gender equality within the academy. It remained open between June and November 2017 and, over this period, 46 responses (34% of all social work academic staff) were received. Of the total responses, 34 were from women (74%) and 12 from men (26%); no-one said they were 'other than female or male', although there was scope on the form to do so. Informants were also asked to provide any other information about themselves that were important to them (see McLaughlin *et al.* 2011 for an exploration of identity recognition). One person chose to self-identify as "BME", two as "LGBT" and one as "bipolar".

Interviews

In order to give us more in-depth understanding of women's experience over time, we conducted 15 semi-structured telephone interviews with women who held, or had recently held, a leadership role of one kind or another in social work education in Scotland. Interviewees were thus a deliberately selected, purposive sample of expert witnesses (Lavrakas, 2008) and included Professors of Social Work, Senior Lecturers/Teaching Fellows, Heads of Social Work and Practicum Managers. All had worked or were working at seven of the eight HEIs that ran social work programmes in Scotland in 2017; some had worked at more than one university. One woman described herself as 'not European'; all others identified as 'white'. Each was invited to tell us about her own academic journey, roles, what obstacles she had faced and what strategies she had used to develop her career.

Analysis

We analysed the survey data using descriptive statistics to reveal patterns within the responses to the closed questions. Since the sample size was quite small, we were able to use qualitative thematic analysis to consider the answers to the open questions (Bryman, 2001). NVivo software was used to carry out a thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data (Maher *et al.*, 2018). The analysis was carried out in group discussion with all members of the research team, enabling us to share and interrogate each other's understanding of the data (Siltanen *et al.* 2008).

Ethics

We received ethical approval for the study from our host University and gained informed consent from all participants. A key ethical consideration for both parts of this study was the issue of anonymity and confidentiality. The difficulty of preserving anonymity within small academic communities has been noted in other studies (Periera, 2017). Although our survey was anonymous and we do not name any of our interviewees, in order to protect confidentiality we took care not to ask, and not to reveal in this paper, important demographic details. So, for example, we have not identified anyone by the nature of their institution, job title, or other obviously identifying information. Furthermore, while we recognise that there are important structural and intersecting inequalities that go beyond gender, given the small size of the overall study population, we realised that revealing information about ethnicity, disability, sexuality, or other key demographic characteristics would risk identifying individuals. We have therefore made every effort in the discussion to ensure that we have not breached this principle.

Limitations

Every research study has limitations (Bryman, 2001). We are fully aware of the limitations in our study, which we now address in turn.

Firstly, Scotland is a small country, with a population of only 5.2 million people; there were only eight higher education institutions offering social work education in 2017 and so our results cannot be held to be statistically generalisable. Yet, this was never our intention, and we believe that it does not make our findings any less rigorous or significant. On the contrary, as a case-study example (Yin, 2013), Scotland's size and profile provides a unique account that has value in its own right, and against which other case-study examples may be compared and contrasted.

Secondly, it may be alleged that our sample was not representative, because our respondent numbers were small and all the informants either *chose* to take part in the online survey or were *invited* to take part in the telephone interviews, suggesting that they were already interested in the topic. Again, this is true, but does not take away from the many different and fine-tuned responses that were received both online and in interview. Moreover, evidence suggests that online surveys conventionally achieve response rates of, on average, 33% (Nulty, 2008); our response rate was therefore not exceptional. Interviewing a small number of selected respondents is also characteristic of the narrative, biographical approach that we adopted in the telephone interviews (Reissman, 2005).

Thirdly, it might be argued that our focus was too much on the 'success stories', on those who had achieved seniority. It is indeed the case that the interview sample was chosen from women at the higher end of the career ladder, but each of these women had insights about

the struggles they had faced on their academic journeys. We recognise the particular challenges faced by those at an early and mid-career stage (see, for example, Kandika Howson *et al.*, 2018 and Murgia & Poggio, 2018). Our survey enabled us to capture some of the those experiences, recognising that even the term 'career stage' is open to debate (Breeze & Taylor, 2018).

Fourthly, we must acknowledge that we, too, are four female academics working in Scotland and at different career stages. We are 'insider' researchers; to a very large degree, studying a subject that is our daily lived experience. Following Brannick & Coghlan (2007) and Burns *et al.* (2012), we believe that as long as we are prepared to open ourselves and our assumptions to scrutiny, this may give us special understanding of both what was said and not said in this study.

Finally, it is important to be clear that our main focus was to find out more about *women's* experience of gender in the academy. We were thus less interested in men's experience, except where this contrasted with women's experience, and there was no deliberate attempt to interrogate 'trans' issues. This does not suggest a lack of concern on our part for other areas of oppression, including those relating to 'race'/ethnicity, disability, sexuality etc. We acknowledge that black women inevitably face additional pressures in universities as do disabled women (see Bernard, 2017; Kwali, 2017), just as sexuality impacts on experiences in both academic and public life (see Knochel *et al.*, 2017; Richardson & Monro, 2013). We hope, nevertheless, that our decision to focus on women's experience 'as women' will offer clarity about that experience in its own right, while acknowledging the particularities of our own case-study.

Findings

a) Results of the online survey

Baseline data

Respondents came from across the occupational grades, with 3 professors taking part, 8 senior lecturers, 21 lecturers, 5 researchers (one of whom was a senior), 4 teaching fellows (again one was a senior), one tutor and 4 people who defined their roles as 'other'. The academic background of survey informants was variable, with women as likely as men (relative to the numbers taking part) describing having postgraduate degrees and, notably, PhDs. Women and men were also both involved in a range of academic work, from teaching and tutoring through to visiting students on placement.

It was the question about submission of research outputs to the last Research Excellence Framework (REF) that elicited the first clear gender difference. While men were roughly even in their response (5 said yes and 6 said no; one did not answer), women were much more likely to state that their work had not been submitted (only 8 said yes, as compared with 23 who said no; 3 declined to answer). This may have been a feature of their age and stage in the academy, because many women (17) said they expected that their work would be returned in the next REF. But again, this contrasts unfavourably with men, where 8 said yes and only 2 said no, and 2 did not reply.

Closed questions

Informants were invited to agree or disagree with a number of statements that were designed to elicit their views about the university's commitment to gender equality, the fairness of promotion processes, institutional recognition of caring responsibilities and direct discrimination. All demonstrated a range of views, though it was marked that six women felt that they had been discriminated against in their jobs because of their gender (no men made such an assertion).

We also asked about being valued by colleagues, about workload, happiness and work-home balance. Strikingly, while most women were happy in their current roles and mostly felt valued, 19 out of 34 (56%) said their work was not manageable in paid hours, and 12 out of 34 (36%) did not feel able to strike the balance they wanted between home and work. Men fared much better, with only 5 out of 12 (42%) unable to manage their work in paid hours, and 3 out of 12 (25%) stating that their home-work balance was unacceptable. We might, of course, assume that this is, in part, a statistical glitch created by the small numbers of men relative to the women in the study. However, the question relating to caring (for children or others) gives us the clearest indication of the issues at stake here. In the study, 24 of the women (71%) said they had had caring responsibilities outside of work at some point during their academic careers. In contrast, only 5 of the men said this had been their experience (42%). While this finding was in no way surprising, its significance cannot be ignored, as demonstrated further in the open questions that followed.

Open questions

Open questions invited informants to elaborate their views in more detail, beginning with their feelings about their universities, then moving onto feelings about their actual posts.

The answers helped us to understand not just *what* happened to women and men in the social work academy, but also offered some possible explanations as to *why* this might be so.

The first open question asked respondents to rate their HEI's commitment to gender equality. Significantly, only 42% of respondents agreed that 'There is real commitment at my institution to continuing to improve performance on gender equality'. Invited to offer additional comments, they gave a number of different replies, all of which broadly reflected one of three key themes. These themes appeared again and again throughout the survey.

Firstly, respondents identified a gap between rhetoric and reality, or between theory and practice, as one person stated: "Lots of noise but no real action, seems designed for an external audience rather than a real commitment to change because it is right and proper." Another respondent acknowledged that although efforts had been made to address the gender balance in their team, the majority of senior posts were still occupied by men. The issue of visibility was therefore of ongoing concern, in spite of institutional schemes to address this.

Secondly, respondents wrote about the impact of caring responsibilities, particularly on women. One person went on to say that the lack of real consideration of work-life balance impacted negatively on students as well as staff, and was demonstrated in the lack of a "family friendly timetable", that takes account of school holidays or childcare opening hours. She continued, "It is ridiculous. We talk about widening access and issues of gender equality but do nothing. Staff are affected, students are affected."

Thirdly, respondents drew attention to the work culture of academia, and to its negative impact especially on women. One person wrote “Academia is a difficult place for gender equality. Progress depends on over-performing and long hours’ culture. This creates gender inequality.”

The second open question unpacked this further. Asked about promotion, only 41% felt able to agree that promotions processes were ‘fair and based on merit’. Some people had not yet applied for promotion and because of this, their responses were (as one person said) “cautious”. But those people who had something to say were unequivocal in saying that promotion depends on building an international profile: attending conferences overseas and developing international contacts. For those with caring responsibilities, that is, predominantly women, this expectation may be unattainable. As one respondent said, “You are caught in a trap and pushed up a real cul-de-sac here”.

The third open question, regarding institutional support for those with caring responsibilities, demonstrated real ambivalence amongst respondents. While only 13% of those who took part in the survey felt that their institution did *not* offer such support, and a number of people were able to point to support for those with childcare responsibilities, nonetheless, there was recognition across the board that the long hours’ culture in academia is not conducive to meeting caring obligations. Moreover, it was suggested that caring for children was given more institutional backing than care for older adults. The gender issues were ambiguous here. A flexible working environment (for example, no ‘clocking in and out’) meant that the academic work-life was easier to fit around caring

duties. But as one person said, “I have yet to see someone who can work part-time in an academic role that actually involves part-time working hours. There is an expectation (and this is role modelled) that staff will respond to issues immediately, including evenings and weekends, and this is challenging when you have caring responsibilities”.

The next set of questions turned from the university to the job and to how people felt about it. Thankfully, 80% of respondents said they felt valued by their colleagues, ‘mostly’ or ‘all the time’. 67% agreed that there were opportunities to progress their career, and 80% thought that they get the support they need to do their job. 69% were ‘mostly happy’ in their current role, and another 16% were ‘sometimes happy’. However, it was the question relating to workload that produced most varied responses. More than 50% of respondents said that their work was ‘not at all’ or ‘mostly not manageable in my paid hours’; meanwhile 30% said that it ‘mostly’ or always was ‘manageable’. This left 17% saying that it ‘sometimes’ was the case. Additional comments demonstrated that having caring responsibilities impacted on how people felt experienced this. For example, one woman said, “I love my job but find it difficult to balance caring responsibilities with the demands of my work and sometimes this impacts my health and my relationships with others outside of work”. Another added, “Within our small unit there is mutual support but I am less convinced about wider structures. Despite supportive mechanisms, additional work is added without a great deal of thought about how this is to be managed which is particularly complex for a part-time worker”.

This point was reflected in other accounts too; the ‘neo-liberal’ university is not an easy place to work, as one man explained: “The nature of academic work is that the amount of

work we could do is infinite, so it always feels as if there is more that could be done. I make a conscious effort to keep my work within my contracted hours, however this means I have to make hard decisions about what to do and what to decline. Sometimes this means saying no to things that could otherwise be rewarding or valuable. It also means that a lot of time is spent on administrative tasks that are low value because the institution requires them.”

This explains articulately why 72% of all respondents agreed that “there is a long working hours culture” at their institution, and only 50% said they felt able to strike a balance between work responsibilities and home life. They wrote about the need to “learn to protect yourself from the wider university”, about “actively resisting” the pressures of working outside hours, while others also acknowledged that work deadlines “would not be met” if they did not regularly work from home. One woman identified that students also put pressure on academics; she said that a poor working environment encourages home-working: “... students increasingly expect you to be available to them around the clock. While we can work at home I would say strongly that you need to in order to get the space to do academic work.” Senior staff can make things more difficult for junior staff by absorbing, not challenging, this culture of overworking.

The question of gender discrimination produced diverse responses. Reassuringly, 78% of people said that they had not been discriminated against because of their gender. But almost 9% ‘preferred not to say’. One woman wrote that because this was a relatively small sample, her story might be recognised; another said that, “Discrimination is covert and therefore not open to challenge”; while a third said, “I don't feel that this question allows for the subtleties of sexism to be addressed”. One woman raised the issue of caring again,

stating that while she had not been directly discriminated against, “but yes indirectly, particularly in relation to the combination of gender/age/caring responsibilities”.

The last question related to the further steps that institutions might take to promote gender equality. Here a range of answers included the need for more transparency, clear progression planning, better planning for maternity/paternity leave, more mentoring and leadership training, and modelling and encouragement of job-sharing at higher levels. There was also a call for more “family-friendly policies”, for a “culture of working within core hours”, as well as a commitment to “an authentic academia” – one that demonstrates commitment to the welfare of its staff.

In summary, the survey told us as much about academic life as it affects women and men as it did about gender equality. And yet the experience of social work academics was impacted through and through by issues of gender, and especially by caring responsibilities and by societal expectations of women and men. These themes were also explored in the interviews with senior academic women.

b) Findings from the interviews

The aim of the interviews, as already stated, was to build a picture of women’s journeys in and through the social work academy, with a focus on what helped, individually and institutionally. We will not attempt to present all the interview findings here; issues such as mentoring, building alliances and seeking support from others will be explored in our next paper. Rather our intention is to pick up two key themes from the surveys: the impact of family caring and working in the ‘neo-liberal’ academy. In order to place these in a wider

context, we will also introduce a topic that was much discussed by the women respondents, that is, the position of social work in the academy.

Managing work and family

Just as in the rest of the study, the interviewees discussed the challenges and pressures of managing competing demands of home and family life. Some women identified that the university had been a good place to work while raising a family; there was more institutional acceptance of family caring, and more opportunities for flexible work arrangements. But most women agreed that,

“If you want to progress your academic career, you really need to make a very firm commitment to giving up a lot of your family time for work, that makes me make a choice in the other direction, and that's the issue...” She continued, “I think there is more that institutions can do. I think what the university, or the academy, needs to do is it needs to address the contradiction of research is something you do in your own time” (Interviewee 15).

Clearly, while caring continues to be a gendered expectation, it is difficult to see how this will change; traditional social expectations that disadvantage women’s careers are therefore reinforced within the academic setting.

The challenges of the ‘neo-liberal’ academy

An increasing number of publications have examined the ‘neo-liberal’ university (for example, Brown, 2003; David, 2015; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Garrett, 2010). Our interviewees also identified the competitive, performance culture of HE, and described it as a place that was “sometimes toxic” in which to work. Their views were

broadly reflective of those we find in the wider literature; they also mirror the findings from our survey. But gender differences also impacted on this too, as one woman said:

“I’m actually thinking of one person who probably would have seen leadership as being able to carve out time for himself to make sure he published what was necessary to make sure his name was always up there” (Interviewee 1).

Again, another said:

“It’s not enough for a few bright stars to shine – they fade and nothing changes!” (Interviewee 2).

What this brief introduction demonstrates is that it cannot be left to individuals to succeed or fail. There needs to be institutional support for a different kind of work-life balance, a more realistic, family-friendly, healthy academy, which acknowledges women’s greater caring responsibilities (see Young & Holley, 2005). Such an environment is one that women students are likely to benefit from too.

The position of social work in the academy

Bringing these two issues together, the interviews highlighted social work’s insecure position in the academy. While most survey respondents had said they felt valued as members of staff, the interviewees had a strong sense that social work itself was “not valued” and “not understood” as a discipline in HE; practice knowledge and experience were not given weight in the way that academic theory and research were, and there was little or no encouragement for academics to have a continuing commitment to the social work profession (in contrast, they felt, to the profession of medicine, for example). Many spoke about how important their practice experience was to them; they saw a continued link with practitioners as vital to their role as social work educators. The link with practice helped to

keep their research and/or teaching “alive and relevant”, and yet it was treated by the institution as “another, less valued layer” on top of their usual academic tasks.

This finding speaks to what can only be described as the contradictory nature of working in HE. The senior women social work academics saw themselves as having dual identities as social workers and academics. As social workers, they felt they had skills and values that were transferable in their academic careers, helping to create cultures of change and inclusivity within their work environments. These skills and values also helped them to negotiate the academy and build their own careers. The link with social work practice was a strength and something that they, as leaders in social work, had used to link social work with the larger agendas of their academic institutions, for example, the social justice, impact and diversity agendas. At the same time, however, being ‘social work academics’ was problematic because social work as a discipline was regarded as somehow less prestigious and less worthy in the academy. As one interviewee explained,

“I think perhaps with vocational programmes like social work there’s maybe not as high an academic status as other academic subjects. And I think we have to work quite hard to raise our profile and to...it’s that thing about having to work twice as hard to get to the same level as other academic [subjects]” (Interviewee 3).

This feels a hard message to hear, given what we have already said about the added responsibilities faced by women in general in the academy.

Discussion

We began this study with two overall objectives: to understand better the experience of women in social work education and then to use this knowledge to try to improve the situation for women in the social work academy. Reviewing the evidence from the survey, it is clear that our findings, depressingly, mirror those of other international studies of women in HE. Women social work academics in Scotland enjoy their work and see it as important. But social work is neither exempt, nor a refuge, from the turmoil of the current 'neo-liberal' academy. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted the double jeopardy that women in social work education experience, located as they are in a discipline that is both marginal and marginalised (Cree, 2019); their 'success' is inhibited by social work's under-valued status as well as their own experiences of individual and institutional gender inequality.

Conclusion

This, then, is the stark reality for women in the social work academy, not just in Scotland and the UK, but across the world. There are, of course, individual, collective and institutional strategies that can and have been adopted in attempting to mitigate these challenges. We will return to these in our next paper, in the hope that some of the lessons learned in Scotland may offer some personal encouragement as well as suggest wider tactics for change and reform at home and abroad. Nevertheless, whatever we come up with, the space for manoeuvre will, inevitably, be restricted, firstly, by social work's tentative relationship with the academy and secondly, by women's continuing responsibilities as primary carers. Writing about the persistence of gender inequality in HE, Morley (2012: 29) argues that what we need is 'new rules for a very different game'. It is the 'different game' that we now must create together.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Carnegie UK Trust for funding this research, conducted as part of The University of Edinburgh's social work centenary project. See <http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/centenary>

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Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://data.sssc.uk.com/data-publications/22-workforce-data-report/157-scottish-social-service-sector-report-on-2016-workforce-data>

ⁱⁱ See Scottish Social Services Council, Analysis of Gender of Managers, 20/06/17, supplied by Mike Docherty, Workforce Intelligence Manager, Scottish Social Services, Dundee DD1 4NY, by email on 9th April 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since this research was conducted, a ninth HEI in Scotland is now offering a professional social work programme.

^{iv} This has changed its name to Online Surveys. It is a tool for creating online surveys, run by Jisc, and used by over 300 different organisations in the UK and internationally. See <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>