Interpreting University Women’s Voices: Voluntary Rejection or Organisational Micro-Politics?

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Introduction

Women’s low representation in certain disciplinary areas and especially in professorial grades and in positions of power and decision making is a much-researched theme in higher education (Gold, 1998; Jackson, 2002). In recent decades, globally, higher percentages of women have enrolled in university education and have performed well but academic women’s career progression has been much less evident.

In South Asia, Sri Lanka has the second highest female literacy rate and the highest female participation rate in primary and secondary education. Sri Lankan women’s enrolment in university education and performance in undergraduate examinations, in most disciplinary areas, in recent years, has either surpassed or been on par with that of men. UNDP (2004) hailed Sri Lanka as the best performer in South Asia in building the capacities of women.

Yet a lack of correspondence has been noted between women’s achievement in university education, and their entry into academia and progression into university management positions. In the total university academic staff population in 2002, the percentage in the senior lecturer grades is 33.1, while the highest percentage, 39.5, are at the lowest grade of lecturer. Very few women occupy leadership positions such as the Vice Chancellor, Dean or Registrar.

Among the perspectives from which attempts are made to explain the persistence of such trends in higher education, are the person-centered perspective, structure-centered paradigm (Bond, 1996) and culture-centered approach (Smulders, 1998).

Jackson (2002) argued “researchers engage in qualitative methods and enable women’s voices to be heard and women’s stories to be told in a way which had not happened in the past” (p. 21). This paper attempts to interpret women’s voices, in this instance, the voices of women students, academics and key stakeholders who responded to the interviews and participated in the two follow-up workshops, in our study on Gender Equity in Higher Education in Sri Lanka, with a view to understanding the inconsistencies and contradictions that emerged from these responses. The paper approaches the problem from two angles: whether this lack of correspondence is a result of a propensity for voluntary rejection on the part of high-performing women graduates and academics or a result of their unvoiced response to organisational micro-politics.

Pertinent Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Three possible reasons are posited to explain the low representation of women academics in higher academic grades: (i) that women do not apply for professorial grades, (ii) that they apply and are not successful and (iii) that there is a culture of institutional sexism in the universities (Jackson, 2002).

The person-centered perspective, links these characteristics to the psycho-social attributes, including personality characteristics, attitudes and behaviour skills of women themselves. Bagihoie (1993) found that only 56.0% of her sample of women academics were married or had a partner and only 30.0% had children. Many had chosen not to have a conventional family life and to give priority
to their careers. Raddon (2002) pointed out that it becomes necessary for women academics to develop the ability to resolve the contradiction between the ‘successful academic’ and the ‘good mother.’ Loder and Eley (1998) found that women do not apply for research grants in the same proportion as men.

The structure-centered paradigm argues that women have a disadvantageous position in organisations - discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, male resistance to women in management positions, absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women and limited opportunities for leadership training and for development of competencies as a result of the power structure (Bond, 1996), which defines the behaviour of women. Women can succeed in Higher Education, but they do so at a price (Thomas, 1990). The implications of combining an academic career with family life are that women may be viewed as a liability to departments in terms of research contribution thus perpetuating and strengthening discrimination against women. Morley (1999) explains further about the process of micro-politics that operates in the organisational structure. The field of micro-politics focuses on how power is relayed through everyday practices and contributes to the understanding of the obstacles to women’s professional efficiency and advancement. It “expresses processes of stalling, sabotage, manipulation, power bargaining, bullying, harassment and spit” and “those power-laden micro-processes are notoriously difficult to challenge through policies for equality” (p. 5).

Jyette Hilden (cited in Loder, 1998) alleges that the research world favours male researchers, their theories and their angles. The male culture of the universities discriminates heavily against women, with a real lack of women mentors and role models for both students and academics. Walsh (2002) refers to institutions where women (and other non-traditional members) are still ‘new’ and ‘different.’ “Though some individual staff members may have been there for many years, they remain ‘other,’ intruders in a place whose historical purpose has specifically worked to construct and defend the difference and differentials which render us ‘woman’ to the ‘man of reason’” (p. 34). Seymour and Hewitt (1997) referred to a fear of visibility that could silence women even when they wish to articulate their viewpoints.

The culture-centered approach links person-centered and organisational structure perspectives in the social construction of gender and the assignment of specific roles and responsibilities and expectations to men and women. Gender relations are kept in place between the actors, both the dominant and the subordinate to social and organisational reality (Smulders, 1998). The gendered division of domestic labour is often mirrored in the academic workplace, where women academics carry disproportionately high teaching, pastoral and administrative loads, that circumscribe their participation in research (Bagihole, 1993). Women are also typically concentrated on departmental and faculty committees that are not decision making bodies (Brooks, 1997). The kind of ‘cultural annexation’ (Spurling, 1997) is sometimes referred to as a ‘glass wall’ rather than a ‘glass ceiling.’

Researchers have also pointed out that women have less access to the formal and informal networks in the research community (O’Leary and Mitchell, 1990). Sutherland (1985: 25) claimed that the university is a ‘man’s world’ and the ‘old boy network is influential.’ Women lack sponsors or mentors, supportive relationships where older and experienced academics contribute to younger colleagues’ career development. Cockburn (1995) pointed out how “[w]omen’s relative absence (on
political decision making bodies) deepens women’s silence and so the cycle goes on” (cited in Bagihole, 2002: 54).

Sri Lankan Voices

The study on Gender Equity in Higher Education in Sri Lanka was part of a larger cross-cultural study that examined the drivers for the introduction and the sustainability of interventions to realise gender equity in access, curriculum transformation and staff development. The Sri Lankan study focused on the University of Colombo as its research site. The study analysed documented statistical data on university admissions, enrolment and performance, and the career mobility of women in academia. Interviews with 57 persons: key stakeholders, staff and students were supplemented by observations of 11 classes, seven meetings and two workshops. As a follow-up to the research study, two workshops on incorporating gender in the university curriculum, were also held, in which academics from 11 universities in the country participated.

This paper presents an analysis of data collected from the interviews and at the two workshops held as a follow-up to the study to sensitise university academics on the need to mainstream gender into university curricula.

Conformity to Tradition

Third World researchers, have argued that as far as women are concerned, ‘access (to education)’ is ‘culturally defined’ and the relevance of formal education is determined by the societal expectations of what is ‘feminine’ (UNESCO, 1987). Rola (1987) pointed out that socialisation in the context of women seems to be heavily weighted in favour of tradition and social institutions of family, kinship and marriage.

The university academics and students interviewed for this study were selected on the basis of their above average performance and interest in a university career. It was felt that the gender role socialisation that the female university students had received from their families would continue to affect their career aspirations in later life.

The interviews in our study highlighted the positive role played by families in motivating and encouraging girls to pursue education that indicated an evident break from traditional gender roles. Parents, extended family members and even their communities were shown as valuing higher education for the students. Even the three students who came from a rural background compounded by financial difficulties were encouraged to study by their parents and all had made personal sacrifices to enable their daughters to attend university.

The key stakeholders felt that economic and social aspirations, the need to have job security through higher education and the perception of education as an alternative to dowry for girls in the marriage market motivate families to invest in their daughters’ education.

A key respondent explained the dearth of women enrolling in postgraduate courses as due to the fact that they often received an undergraduate education (obviously referring to Arts) that does not motivate professionalism and achievement of excellence. However, four students interviewed wanted to remain within the university system as probationary lecturers and pursue their higher studies.
Some academics who were interviewed perceived the increase of women in undergraduate programmes and the ‘feminisation’ of some disciplinary areas, more as a result of “the rote learning system of secondary school teaching facilitating women to achieve higher grades and outnumber men in faculties such as Arts and Law and Biological-oriented Sciences” rather than women’s excellence in university studies as compared to men.

One university teacher elaborated this view with examples.

“For example in one of my classes, International Law, I asked them how many of you read a daily newspaper and about two hands went up in a class of 17. It shows that aside from looking at life they don’t even have the time or the inclination to read a newspaper. So it is a very skewed education system. In that system what we find is that women are doing really well!”

The student interviews also indicated how traditional cultural norms are continued at the university, even though they had expected a dramatic change from the norms upheld by their community.

“So I really faced a lot of problems. Sometimes they are worse than boys. Like women shouldn’t socialise and ride bicycles. If you do, they come and hit you. It happened once or twice. If both of us were walking on the road they say ‘ah nice exhibition’ or something like that. So I have a problem, so I wrote about it. I wrote how conflict is not between the communities but within the communities.”

The Law student also had a similar experience as she was seen as an out-going and liberal woman.

“Ah! I think that society must change their attitudes. You see I can talk openly because I had an affair with one boy in my batch and he told me I was difficult. He knows about me, you know ‘feminist.’ The other boys were not too happy. Once we all went on a trip and we were all dancing. Somehow, they had taken a photograph of me without my head covered. They sent this picture to his parents. His parents were upset because I was with my head uncovered and dancing. So, he gave me up. He couldn’t stand up to his parents and explain about me.”

The intersection of rituals used for student orientation in university life and early socialisation patterns associated with ethnic and religious membership surfaces clearly here. Both the students we have quoted from above were from minority communities, which impose rigid behaviour codes and they had opted to join this University and not the one in their own regions because of the desire to free themselves from those behaviour codes. Yet they realised that parochial community practices persist even in the ‘liberalised’ university environment.

Exclusion

The recent interest in quality assessment has stemmed from the criticism of the quality of graduates in local universities who are considered as lacking the skills to meet the demands of the labour market.

Among the qualities desired are communication skills, initiative, leadership attributes, breadth and depth of knowledge and ability to apply the knowledge gained. It is evident that capacity for developing these qualities through classroom teaching-learning is limited. Independent learning, access to facilities such as library and computers, engagement in extra-curricular activities such as
clubs and associations, music and drama and sports contribute in a large measure to the
development of these critical social and transferable skills.

Academic staff interviewed by us felt that the education system in Sri Lanka itself contributes to the
lack of engagement by students in the academic and social life of the university. Students come from
schools where academic performance is over-emphasised and extra-curricular activities are not
essential for entering university. In an environment where resources and access to jobs are severely
limited, holistic development is not seen as essential to development.

The situation was clearly explained by a Senior Lecturer in Law.

“There were probably about 10-12 students and we were supposed to be hiring lawyers. So we said
‘why did you choose the law?’ and most of them said ‘because my parents wanted me to.’ Very few
said ‘because I think it is exciting’ .......

You come in coached in the sense and say that ‘I think I can change society; I think law is a tool
which we can utilise.’ None of that.”

All students interviewed had hardly participated in extra-curricular activities as they felt it was not
safe for them to travel alone in the evening. The social reality of a woman’s safety at night
augmented by ideological notions that women who stay late will be viewed ‘differently’ prevented
women from participating fully in university life.

Many of the students talked about parents overprotecting daughters, which hampered their
mobility, and also expectations of parents for women to get married.

“I feel women need to learn to be self-confident, to believe in their strength. I think the fact that
women can’t stay out late at night is a huge burden .... But I can’t spend time in the library after
five and we have classes till five. But I am too scared to stay late, whereas the boys stay till late and
study in the library. Just getting around is so difficult for women. We are always fenced in.”

“We can’t freely attend to our work, our interests because parents don’t want us going out on our
own. It’s very restrictive. I mean, they have to be protective of children, but it curtails our freedom
to do what we like.”

Despite parity in numbers in many of the faculties, the university is a highly gendered space; and
some spaces exclude women in subtle ways:

“You know the computer lab is always dominated by men so it is a little uncomfortable for us go in
sometimes. Also, it is very noisy, so it is difficult for us to get work done.”

The student interviewees stated they were surprised at their peers’ attitudes.

“Recently, these classmates of mine had to go on a field trip for some research and their boyfriends
were not happy. They told me they had to practically worship them to get permission. Then the
boys too had to go on a field trip and there was no issue of permission from the girls - they use their
authority to get what they want. Sometimes I am surprised at such unenlightened, unequal
relationships after all they’ve been exposed to here, but they (girls) continue to be so ignorant and
conservative.”
Sri Lankan women’s poor participation in politics, is also mirrored within the university system. None of the women interviewees had joined the Student Union as it was seen as an exclusively male domain. Some of them felt politics was not for women and did not want to be involved. Others acknowledged that the lack of access to the Student Unions limited their social life and hampered access to wider social networks.

One staff member described this situation vividly.

“There are no women students who are giving leadership to the unions or any organisations. They don’t because student politics is so dirty, so violent and so tied up with outside politics. Very few women survive and one of the tactics men use to scare away the women, even those who are keen on coming ‘this is not for you women because your name will get spoiled.’ We have the inclination, the boys don’t allow us.”

Some senior academics felt the absence of any kind of networking such as women’s groups or associations to support each other and strive towards concerted action to be a constraint.

“Forming associations, handling a party. I mean you have to look, there isn’t a single women’s association in this entire university. I don’t know. I would be very surprised. I don’t know of any. Like women’s Law Student Society or medical or any area or inter faculty women’s organisation. That’s one. And I must also say this. I can’t even see among academic staff across the board very many who give that sort of leadership.”

Thus even though women encountered no significant barriers to achieving academic excellence, their overall involvement in university life was severely limited by social constraints. The women who excel in examinations would, therefore, be able to join the academia due to their examination performance, but would be less able to function as leaders or role models given their limited social and personal development.

**The Culture of Silence**

A major phenomenon emerging from the interviews was the lack of motivation for career advancement and ‘the culture of silence.’ One staff member commented on the attitude of women staff: “I mean if you look at a few of the senior people who are there (in the faculty). Like two are PhD’s but publication and other involvement is very low. They just come for lectures and go home.” The key stakeholders pointed out that even when equal opportunities are available for women, due to various reasons, women do not avail themselves of these opportunities.

The interviews, at the same time, clearly brought out the difficulties faced by women academics in coping with their dual roles. As one stated “problems start when they (the women) get out of the university” obviously referring to the transition from unmarried student status to work and married status, and the work-life balance that is especially relevant for women. “They have to work harder because of their added family responsibilities and having to perform as ‘double actors’.”

Participants in the two workshops held subsequently in November and December 2005 as a follow-up activity, reiterated the above views. Some (for example, Faculty of Medicine staff) pointed out how their biological roles interfere with career aspirations. “Normally, a woman medical graduate is about 28 or 29 years of age when she graduates; if she gets married, it is not possible for her to
delay having a family any further and engage in postgraduate studies.” Lack of support from extended families or domestic help due to the exodus of women to the Middle East for employment make younger women academics face difficulties which senior women had not faced to the same extent, a generation ago.

The key respondents pointed out that the participation of women in decision making and political participation was very low at all levels. One attributed this to the organisational culture in universities in which women are not adequately represented in elected posts such as Deans or appointed posts (Heads of Departments) or on Boards and Councils. The workshop participants confirmed the above position. Thus, for example, the Management Faculty staff members in one university felt that this issue is not given attention by the men in authority at the faculty level. In fact when interviewed about the inclusion of gender in the curriculum, the response of the Dean was “I don’t think it is necessary in our curriculum.” Similarly, the Science Faculty’s senior academic in the same university admitted “[i]t has never occurred to us to think of such issues.” The participant from the South Eastern University similarly alleged that very few opportunities are provided to women to participate in decision making at any level.

A major concern expressed by two key persons was the perceived ‘silence’ of women academics. One vehemently believed that

“Gender equity cannot be realised without creating a general environment within the university for effective democratic participation, discussion and decision making. A university that has an intellectually lively community, committed to democratic values is an essential pre-requisite to realising gender equity. I do not believe that this environment exists in the University of Colombo. Democratic institutions such as Faculties, Senate and Council exist, but they do not function democratically because members, including women do not actively participate to make these institutions function democratically. The silence of young women professors and heads of departments is a matter for grave concern.”

Another colleague attributed this situation to women themselves.

“Even if they have something to say they won’t speak up. Even if it is something affecting them personally they won’t talk.”

She also referred to social processes and relations that operate within institutions with an example of women who do act responsibly and are articulate on issues, saying they feel isolated, even among their women peers who advise them “[d]on’t draw attention to yourself or speak on controversial issues,” “[l]et us not be too visible,” “[i]t is better to be together.”

A lecturer in Law posed the problem of some women ‘not talking out, not taking position’ on issues being discussed. This was echoed by the other academic, drawing from her experience as an academic Warden in a hostel.

“When women students need to take up hostel issues with authorities, they bring ‘the boys.’ The girls think that boys are the ones who know how to make proper decisions and they are the people who can push them. All the boys are dominating, and say you cannot do it alone, we should come behind you. I always tell the girls, if you have a problem come and tell me but don’t come to my hostel with the boys. This is your hostel and you can take your own decisions.”
Another commented that even though women are numerically more, in decision making and in student unions, the men (the minority) dominate. In such circumstances, interviewees were of the opinion that the women academics appear to have to some extent, abandoned the expected functions of being ‘role models’ and ‘mentors’ and that the ‘silence,’ initiated in the home continues at school, the university classrooms and decision making bodies.

**The Issues**

The interviews bring out the forces that work together to act as barriers to university women’s advancement.

To some extent, the person-centered perspective operates, as even though those who join the university faculty after excelling in academic studies and due to an interest in a professional career, find it difficult to combine work and family roles in the face of insufficient child care services. Thus Raddon’s (2002) view that it becomes necessary for women academics to develop the ability to resolve the contradiction between the ‘successful academic’ and the ‘good mother’ becomes relevant for Sri Lankan academics too.

From among the factors mentioned by Bond (1996), discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, or male resistance to women in management positions did not emerge markedly in interviewees. Yet an absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women such as child care facilities in the work place, and limited opportunities for leadership training and for development of competencies as a result of the power structure (for instance, exclusion from co-curricular activities) emerged strongly to place women in a disadvantageous position in the organisation. In combination, thus, the person-centered and the structure-centered perspectives explain what prompts a majority of women academics to willingly renounce their career goals.

Above all, however, micro-politics in the organisation tends to place obstacles to women’s professional efficiency and advancement. Even though the organisation may not “express processes of stalling, sabotage, manipulation, power bargaining, bullying, harassment and spite” in the same tone as referred to by Morley, yet they evidently exist. Amelioration of the situation becomes more problematic, as pointed out by Morley (1999) as “those power-laden micro-processes are notoriously difficult to challenge through policies for equality” (p.5).

Affirmative action needed to remedy this situation would be multi-pronged but the critical intervention appears to be staff development. On the one hand, as a policymaker in Sri Lanka pointed out, affirmative action is required to support women’s training and development:

“The need for proactive, affirmative action programmes to ensure that women teaching staff acquire research and training opportunities may be necessary to balance the current ‘gender neutral’ policies where scholarships and advanced training may be based on disciplines or fields. These policies do not intentionally discriminate against women but they result, in fact, in women staff not having access to training and research opportunities. This can impede their opportunities for career advancement in competition with male staff.”

Another identified a basic need “[m]ay be sort of like how to speak at meetings and those types of things because women are so quiet. That kind of leadership training…. To stand up for their own rights, to stand up for them...”
In addition, as one interviewee articulated, staff development is necessary as “we need to change our mind-set, attitude.” “I suppose if we can have a standard gender programme in school at least we can try to balance out because all that we have are traditional.”

“There should be more awareness programmes and also some kind of training. This Staff Development Centre helps a lot to build confidence. That kind of a course should target more on women. There is a need for awareness programmes for men as well as for women.”

Others echoed the same view:

“I would say not just for women but also make the men also aware. Because ... if they put us down or don’t listen to us then it is very difficult. When you say gender it is both males and females.”

“The family is key in encouraging women to enter university. Social attitudes must change as patriarchal attitudes place women in a lower status and expect certain forms of behaviour from women.”

Key persons also reiterated that the only way to break the culture of silence and develop assertiveness is through staff development and this may necessitate ‘women’s only’ seminars and workshops or mixed group workshops to change attitudes that obstruct active participation of women in university fora.

Above all, policies should be in place not only to ensure equal employment opportunities, but also to plan and implement other ancillary measures that help to translate policies into action.

References


Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the sponsorship from the Department for International Development, UK for the conduct of the study and the contribution made by Prof. Louise Morley, the Coordinator of the Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education Project and the members of the Sri Lankan research team, Prof. Yoga Rasanayagam, Prof. Tressie Leitan, Ms. Kanchana Bulumulle and Ms. Asha Abeyasekera-Van Dort.