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The Perspectives of Women Professors on the Professoriate: A Missing Piece in the Narrative on Gender Equality in the University †

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Abstract: The under-representation of women in the professoriate is a widely acknowledged and complex phenomenon internationally. Ireland is no exception to this and indeed the issue of gender equality in Irish higher education has in the last 24 months emerged on the national policy agenda, largely as a result of a number of high profile legal cases and the subsequent setting up of an expert review panel (2015) and a gender equality taskforce (2017). What has now become clear internationally is that despite the advances women have made in terms of their participation rates as undergraduates, as well as the introduction of gender equity policies, the vast majority of professors in higher education institutions globally are men. Specifically, regarding Ireland in the period 2013–2015, even though 50% of the lecturer staff in universities were women, only 19% of professors were women. While the availability of such data is instructive, attention also needs to focus on examining the organizational culture and practices that appear to perpetuate such gender divisions and gendered patterns of action. On this, however, there is an almost complete absence of studies on the perspectives of women professors in Ireland on the professoriate. The study reported here, which was undertaken within the life story tradition, is one response to this deficit. It is based on interviews conducted with 21 women professors on their perspectives on working as professors in the university sphere in the period 2000-2017. Four key themes were generated during the analysis of their testimony: they regarded universities as operating according to male-definitions of merit; they made a strategic choice not to engage in senior management roles (Senior management is defined as occupying the role of Dean level or above.); they considered there was no room for caring responsibilities in universities; and they emphasized the importance of validation, selection, and networks of support.

Keywords: women; professoriate; gender equality; higher education; Ireland

1. The Historiography of Women's Access to the University Sphere

The under-representation of women in the professoriate internationally is a widely acknowledged and complex phenomenon [1–4] representing, according to Morley, "both cultural misrecognition and material and intellectual oppression" [5] (p. 109). Ireland is no exception to this trend and the issue of gender equality in higher education has, in the last 24 months, emerged on the national policy agenda, largely as a result of a number of high profile legal cases and the subsequent setting up of an expert review panel. The report of that panel noted that "while the higher education institutions have, to varying degrees, sought to address gender inequality, the intractable under-representation of women among staff at senior levels clearly signals the need for new, even radical, approaches to tackling the issue" [6] (p. 1). Thus, trends in Ireland reflect those noted elsewhere; despite the advances women have made in terms of their participation rate as undergraduates, as well as the

introduction of gender equity policies, the vast majority of professors in higher education institutions globally are men [7]. This endemic gender gap cannot be attributed to the absence of skills, abilities, or aspirations of women. Rather, multiple systemic barriers have been shown to exist within the organization and culture of universities that have impeded women's progression into senior academic leadership roles [1,3,8].

While the situation portrayed so far has an extensive history, the historiography of women's access to the university sphere, and particularly the study of the history of women's admission to the ranks of the professoriate, has largely concentrated on the politics of women's entry [9–12]. A number of scholars have narrowed their focus to examine women's action to claim a presence in the university as academics, researchers, and administrators, as well as their "uneven patterns of inclusion as relative outsiders in the academy" [13] (p. 239). Overall, however, there is a vacuum in the *corpus* of research internationally on the history and agency of those located on the margins of the academy, namely women professors.

Specifically, regarding Ireland, while the spotlight is now being shone on the low numbers of women professors across the university sector there, little is known about women professors' own perspectives on the professoriate. Friedman has argued that in documenting the history of university education, there is a need to make women visible, since they have been largely ignored in this genre. She further contends that gender must be examined and understood in local, time-bound contexts and must "always play a part of historical sensibilities" [14] (p. 22). The study reported here can be seen as a response to the argument that Friedman and others have made, namely that women professors form a particular occupational group whose perspectives on the professoriate should be described and analysed [15]. Thus, it is offered as one contribution to the small but growing *corpus* of scholarship which examines the lives of academics of both genders across countries, systems, and institutions [16,17].

2. Gender Inequality in Higher Education: The Irish Context

Irish universities have been, from their very establishment, bastions of male and middle-class privilege. Throughout the nineteenth century, the power base of the university worked hard to resist women's inclusion, and even with the passing of the Irish Universities Act of 1908 and the co-educational framework this introduced, women continued to experience marginalization, both as students and academics. The catalyst which triggered the recent policy response to the issue of gender equality in higher education was a case taken against one university by Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, grand-daughter of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877–1946), noted suffragist and nationalist, and one of the women active in the nineteenth-century movement to allow women access to the university sphere [10].

Discrimination within the university arena historically mirrored discrimination against women across a range of behemoths and social structures most trenchant in the early decades of Irish independence. The State promoted a deeply gendered ideology which placed women firmly within the home sphere through a formidable alliance between the state and the Catholic Church. The gender restrictions imposed by the state throughout the 1920s and 1930s covered such areas as women's right to participate on juries, their right to take examinations to gain entry to certain positions in the civil service, and finally the ban on married women occupying jobs in the public sector [18]. While present-day Irish society is significantly altered from the early decades of political independence, significant residual gender bias is still evident.

In the history of university education in Ireland (the first university, Trinity College Dublin, the sole constituent college of the University of Dublin, was granted its charter in 1592), there has never been a female university president; as of March 2016, four of the 14 Institute of Technology presidents were women and only one of the five college presidents was a women. Fifty percent of lecturer staff in Irish universities were women in the period 2013–2015, yet only 19 percent of professors were women. For the same period, 62 percent of non-academic staff were women, yet 72 percent of the highest

paid non-academic staff were men [6]. The latter figures are not unique to the Irish context, but are representative of the gender divide at a broader European level. Commenting on the issue of gender equality across Europe, the European Commission observed the following in 2015:

> Striking gender inequalities persist when it comes to career advancement and participation in academic decision-making. In 2013, women made up only 21% of the top-level researchers (grade A), showing very limited progress compared to 2010 (20%). Despite significant progress in their level of education relative to men over the last few decades, women are increasingly under-represented as they move up the stages of an academic career. At grade C level, the difference with men stands at 10 percentage points, while at grade A level it reaches 58 percentage points. This effect is even more pronounced in the field of science and engineering, where women represented only 13% of grade A staff in 2013. A generational effect exists amongst grade A researchers, in that women tend to occupy a higher proportion of positions in the youngest age group (49%) relative to the older age groups (22%). In 2014, the proportion of women among heads of higher education institutions in the EU-28 rose to 20% from 15.5% in the EU-27 in 2010 [7].

It concluded by pointing out that within the European Union-28, women made up 28% of scientific and administrative board members and only 22% of board leaders.

Gender inequality in higher education in Ireland continues, despite the enactment of a raft of equality legislation. Under the Employment Equality Acts 1998–2008, the Equality Act 2004, the Equal Status Acts 2000–2011, the Disability Act 2005, and, most recently, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, all HEIs have a statutory responsibility to ensure that all staff and students are treated equally. Under the terms of the Universities Act (1997), universities are charged with promoting "gender balance and equality of opportunity among students and employees of the university" [19]. Also, under the terms of the Institutes of Technology Act (2006), institutes are charged with having "regard to the attainment of gender balance and equality of opportunity among the students and staff of the college" [20]. Furthermore, it is mandated that both sectors have to develop gender equality policies under the official statutory oversight of the HEA.

As part of Ireland's cultural shift to address gender equality, the Athena SWAN Charter was also launched in 2015. Originally conceived of to encourage and recognize gender equality in STEM areas, this charter has expanded to embrace all areas of university activity. Three of the seven Irish universities, namely University College Dublin, Dublin City University, and the University of Limerick, were honored by the Athena SWAN Charter in March 2017 for their advances in the area of gender equality. Also, both University College Dublin and Dublin City University received bronze institutional awards, and the University of Limerick was awarded a bronze departmental award for the initiatives of its Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences. University College Cork, the University of Limerick, and Trinity College Dublin also hold bronze institutional awards. Furthermore, there is now a requirement that all Irish HEIs will secure Athena SWAN bronze awards by the end of 2019 to entitle them to apply for research funding from Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council, and the Health Research Board. While initiatives such as Athena SWAN are to be welcomed, even where governance explicitly includes attention to gender equality, its impact on overcoming gender discrimination is not always evident [21]. As Blackmore notes, managing diversity is a "soft discourse" which can struggle to compete with "the harder managerialist discourses of performativity circulating around universities" [22] (p. 436).

3. The Study

The aim of the study now to be reported was to generate theory on the perspectives of women professors in Ireland on being a woman professor working in Irish universities in the period 2000–2017. A total of 21 women professors across the seven universities in the Republic of Ireland in faculties of Social Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Business were interviewed. While recognizing that research on

gender equality within Irish universities needs to be undertaken from a range of theoretical positions, including those of feminist and neo-Marxist theory, the specific theoretical approach informing the statement of this research aim is interpretivism. This meta-theoretical and paradigmatic approach was adopted as it allows one to engage in research from the participant's point of view. Such research is needed on the grounds that while much can be deduced from 'outsider' research based on pre-ordained theories like those mentioned above, progress in trying to implement change can be enhanced when one is also cognizant of the point of view of participants, or, as interpretivists term it, their 'perspectives'. These are usually expressed in terms of theoretical constructs such as concepts, themes, and propositions generated from data collected through a grounded theory or inductive approach.

The results of this study are based on edited topical life stories within the life history research tradition. This research tradition is, in turn, a sub-discipline within the interpretivist paradigm considered above. The topical life story focuses on one phase, aspect, or issue in an individual's life [23]. It involves the soliciting of a person's life story in relation to that one phase [24]. As a work of 'social science history,' the study was guided by the following central aim, namely to generate theory on the perspectives of women professors in Ireland regarding what it meant to be a professor over the period 2000–2017. Concentrating on the period 2000–2017 allowed for the examination of a period which has witnessed significant reform. In particular, it was one which saw the introduction of new public service management [25]; one when the numbers of female students equaled or surpassed those of males; one when gender equality legislation was enacted; and one when university rankings started to become significant, not necessarily as a measure of quality, but for determining the level of international standing of institutions [26].

Woods defined perspectives as frameworks through which people make sense of the world [27]. Blackledge and Hunt expanded on this definition by listing the key components of perspectives from the point of view of a researcher working within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism [28]. These key components are as follows:

- aims and intentions (each individual can be asked what he or she aims to do in a particular situation);
- strategies that individuals use to achieve their aims;
- the significance that individuals attach to a particular situation;
- the outcomes which participants expect will arise.

An additional part of each component consists of the reasons that individuals give for the aims, strategies, significance, and expected outcomes they express.

The four components outlined above, along with the reasons that participants gave for what they said, provided a framework for generating research *guiding* questions, namely, questions to guide the generation of further *conversation* questions. On this, it is important to keep in mind that the principal aim of the study was not to answer any specific research question. Rather, it was to generate theory regarding the perspectives of women professors in Ireland on what it meant to be a professor in the period 2000–2017, based on data generated through the conversation questions. Thus, the ultimate objective of the study was to realize an aim (to generate theory), and not, as in a positivist fashion, to answer specific research questions.

Given the position outlined above, the study's research *guiding* questions, based on Blackledge and Hunt's components of perspectives as already outlined, were as follows:

- What are your aims as a professor? What reasons do you have for these aims?
- What strategies do you adopt for realizing these aims? What reasons do you have for using these strategies?
- What do you see as the significance of the aims and strategies you have identified? What reasons can you give for them?
- What outcomes do you expect from pursuing your aims and strategies, and for doing so in the light of the significance you attach to them?

It also needs to be highlighted that cognizance was taken of the symbolic interactionist position that, as part of one's perspectives, the past is often used as a frame of reference to make sense of the present. Certainly, it is the case that action always takes place in the present and that present action is influenced, not by what went before, but by one's definition of the present situation. It is also the case, however, that the past shapes our perspectives because we can use it in our definition of the present. Thus, what we know and remember about the past can be applied to present situations in order to work through them. In this way, while the past does not cause present actions, we can use it to define and guide us. In pursuing, then, the *conversation* questions which were generated in relation to each of the four guiding questions noted above, participants were regularly asked to account for what they said through asking them 'why' they said it. In this way, the previous point made, that one's understanding of how one experienced the past, and that one's understanding of how it influences one's current perspectives and actions, was addressed.

Participants were selected through purposive selection [29]. Selection also took cognizance of Goodson and Sikes' observation that "adequacy is dependent not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data" [30] (p. 23). Thus, the number of participants in the study was small. This is also appropriate as there was no intention to generalize from the study to all women professors. Rather what was sought were insights to produce tentative generalizations which could at future dates be tested in further, larger-scale studies, both quantitative and qualitative. Before interviewing commenced, participants were provided with information on the research project. At the time of the interview, they were given further documentation on the project and were invited to sign a consent form. Each individual was interviewed once, with each interview lasting between one and two hours. Where consent was given, interviews were recorded and where consent was not given, field notes were instead taken. Transcripts of recordings and field notes were analyzed using the inductive analysis and grounded theory procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin [31]. The analyses of the testimony from each participant were written up as individual life stories. An overall cross-case analysis of these was then generated.

The nature of the research project undertaken was such that a number of particular ethical issues had to be addressed. These included the fact that the researcher was interviewing women of her own professional group. Hence, she was aware that she needed to be cognizant of her own positionality and of challenges around maintaining both the richness and integrity of the data, while at the same time ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Awareness of positionality was also deemed to be important given that life story research is deeply personal, generating "intensely idiosyncratic personal dynamics" [32]. Grounded theory approaches of constant questioning and constant comparison were used in open coding of the narratives. Concurrently, analytic induction was adopted to raise patterns established to higher levels of generalization. Through the use of these processes, four major propositions were generated.

4. The Results

Each of the four propositions generated is now considered in turn. Also, within this consideration, points of comparison and contrast were established with existing bodies of literature, thus following standard grounded theory approaches for the presentation of results, as opposed to the more positivist approach of treating of these matters of theory and literature in separate additional sections. In all cases, pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants, and data which might identify individuals was obscured. Furthermore, as with all interpretivist research, it is accepted that there is a subjective dimension to the propositions generated. At the same time, the researcher has sought to illustrate her constructs and support her contentions with a generous set of quotations from the data.

> *Professors hold a perspective on universities that is in accord with those who argue that they are institutions that operate according to male-definitions of merit.*

In general, universities present themselves as "gender-neutral meritocracies, concerned with the transmission and creation of scientific, objective knowledge" [33]. However, academia is also a social institution "intimately associated with hierarchy and power" [34]. Accordingly, it is now widely accepted that universities are gendered organizations, operating according to "male definitions of merit and male-dominated career paths" [33] (p. 2). See also [35]; [36] (p. 139–162). On this, Fitzgerald has argued that "measurement against the standards and norms set by men immediately works to disadvantage women" [1] (p. 37). The perspectives of the women professors being reported here reflected the latter position. One of the key themes generated centred on what Professor Ruth Hart termed "the pervasive masculinist culture operating in managerial universities." The transformation from collegial to managerial governance, replicating international trends, has been central in Ireland to the changing organizational culture of the university in the last two decades [37]. Under the new managerialist approach in the sector, there is now a growing focus on measured performance, with efficiency being prioritised over equality. Furthermore, goals of university education have, as elsewhere, been recast in narrowly economic terms that call for market-based reforms [25,38]. Speaking in relation to the international scene, Deem and Ozga have identified associated styles of leadership [39]. These are outcome-oriented, with a clear emphasis being placed on targets, performance, and measurement. Such values were clearly alien to the majority of women professors who took part in this study. On this, Professor Susan Reilly stated:

I often feel as if I am working in sales. How many articles have I written, how much funding have I brought in, how many of my research students are international . . . the endless emails from what is interestingly called the centre of the university asking me to click on links, provide data or updates on this, that and the other.

Professor Joyce Whelan elaborated on this, claiming that intense measurement and surveillance are fostering competitiveness and individualistic patterns of behavior at the expense of collegiality or a commitment to student well-being. She observed:

At the end of the day, you are now measured by the amount of external funding you bring in. Teaching, duty of care to students, contribution to your field in a meaningful way are no longer valued, despite whatever promotion metric is in vogue. This makes a mockery of the core of the work that we do as academics. I also feel that we are constantly being pitted against colleagues . . .

She concluded by noting that "there is no genuine commitment to collegiality or collaboration, as everyone is looking over their shoulder and you are only as good as your last round of funding."

Participants also echoed a published view in the literature that, internationally, student engagement is a gendered activity through which the university institutionalizes nurturance. On this point, Professor Niamh Masterson, who is in a position of senior management, stated:

Women first of all become much more engaged with students. They take on the caring roles much more intuitively. If you are stuck as a Head of Department you are more likely to get a female colleague willing to step in to do a session with students. So, I think as Head of Department you have to make sure you don't exploit them; inadvertently or otherwise.

Professor Denise Thompson commented in similar vein in relation to administration:

In our department over the years it was the women who did most of the unseen administration. Some of the men just didn't bother. Some of the women clearly did too much of it and undid their own career paths by doing too much.

Professor Edel Ryan echoed this perspective, as follows:

I feel that female academics often end up doing what I would call the academic housework; all the things that keep the thing moving . . . that the institution needs to get done. It has to be done. If these things are not done the institution will crash. So we need them done. But what happens is the women volunteer to do it because they see it needs to be done. They do it and they don't realise that it's not going to be valued when they come for a promotion, or not as valued as much as some other things that they could have done.

She concluded by stating: "they do it because they can't stand watching it not being done or being done so badly that they may as well move in and do it. That's all part of our own socialization."

A number of participants commented on what they perceived to be gendered hierarchies across academic disciplines. Professor Sheila O' Donoghue noted:

I think the position of the humanities and the importance of funding rather than results is about big men and big science and I think it's a very strong gender issue, and not just in Ireland.

Professor Gwen Matthews similarly reflected:

I think the disciplinary divide is gendered in ways that are tacit and sometimes direct, but I think the experience of being a woman faculty member here is frankly much harder than I ever knew before . . . The university is a tough place and I think gender is one problem among many. For me the biggest problem is the culture of non-transparency, power is hoarded by some . . . we are constantly cast in a reactive posture.

On this, she added "the corporate culture of the university carries with it assumptions about gender, sometimes about social class, sometimes about the value of certain subjects over others."

Elaborating further, the participants took up the long-refrained view that, as part of the corporatization of higher education, the civic discourse of the university has been gradually replaced by the language of commercialization, privitization, and deregulation [40,41]. Professor Gwen Matthews noted:

I remember being very shocked by the language people used because I was coming from a critical humanist tradition, which is opposed to corporatism, and in fact what I discovered here is that even people who seem connected to that tradition intellectually seemed steeped in corporate modes of thought and corporate ways of doing things.

This view also reflects an international one that the culture of universities can be such that it privileges the hiring and promotion of men over women, with gatekeeping operating as a key mechanism for reinforcing existing norms and ultimately homosociability [42,43]. Professor Maeve O' Flaherty focused on the latter issue, observing:

I think a huge problem has been male academics hiring younger versions of themselves and that can even extend to men in similar familial situations. Very often women applicants present differently in different ways. Their career trajectory is usually very different. It can seem ragged to a certain sort of male perspective and there is that sense that in terms of hiring women, there is, and it can be all the more invidious for being subconscious, a sense that the women don't fit the role, rather than thinking in terms of how the candidate might change the role in particular ways.

At the same time, the participants did recognize that some change had taken place in the period 2000–2017. One drew attention to what she described as the development of the university from a "clerical, feudal and male" environment to one in which women have become more visible, and in which promotion processes have become more transparent. What now exists, Professor Denise Thompson claimed, is a situation in which "the presentation of self in a gravitas mode" is no longer based on the assumption that professors are all "male, heavy and wearing a black suit."

Nonetheless, this was qualified by others in a general recognition of how the relatively new and prevailing discourse of managerialism has reintroduced an environment permeated by hegemonic discourses. This qualification is in accord with the views of both McKnight and Hill (2009) and Leathwood (2017) that the corporatization of higher education, and particularly its impact on research activity, continues to sustain and perpetuate gender inequalities [44,45]. Furthermore, Professor Maeve O' Flaherty highlighted a distinct Irish dimension to this scenario when she stated that "it is worse in educational institutions that have a clerical inheritance." She further observed: "I think for universities where there isn't even that direct clerical inheritance, there is still the institutional memory of a male power structure."

Professors hold a perspective that they made a strategic choice not to engage in senior management roles.

The majority of participants in this study were not engaged in senior management roles, with their decision not to ascend the corporate hierarchy being a strategic choice. This raises the issue of those who reach the rank of professor and who are then asked to assume management roles, a role adjustment which is often challenging and far removed from the scholarly engagement which typifies the work of the professoriate. On this, Professor Sara Watters noted that senior management roles were "conducted principally by men, or by women who felt they had to behave like men." Professor Stephanie Green also observed that such roles "privileged male figures and male voices, proving challenging for many women who occupy them." Such perspectives reflect a wider view that senior management roles are primarily masculine and that the organizational culture in universities reinforces and legitimates women's position at the lower levels of the university hierarchy [3,46]. Participants were generally of the view that despite the enactment of a raft of gender equality legislation and of equality policies, undertaking senior management roles required the endorsement of particular university policies that often ran counter to one's own values. Professor Rachel Desmond, a dean, acknowledged the fact that she was initially reluctant to apply for her position, because she equated senior management with conflict. On this she commented: "I was terrified about what I had seen as my inability to deal with conflict. I found that to be something that held me back." Professor Jill Reynolds articulated a different view, noting that her own reluctance to apply for such a role stemmed from the fact that she had witnessed "the endless working hours, hostile encounters and personality change" that were associated with the previous female dean of faculty. She also observed that many university policies ran counter to her core values, and hence, she "couldn't possibly advocate them and be able to sleep at night." Such views echo research by Morley and Crossouard, where women recounted having to "negotiate and navigate a range of ugly feelings and toxicities that depleted aspirations, well-being and opportunities" [47] (p. 801). Commenting on her decision not to pursue a senior management track, Professor Sheila O' Donoghue stated: "If I went for that role, I wouldn't get a raise . . . so there isn't really any economic incentive. I don't really work on economic incentives, but I take salary seriously as a measure of respect."

A number of participants also struggled with the idea of other women occupying senior management roles. Such a move by those who made it represented, according to Professor Jill Reynolds, "a move to a dark side of academia, one which promoted individualism, competition and self." Professor Bernadette Wilson, also a dean, focused instead on her own agency in achieving her professional goals, notwithstanding the existence of a gendered culture which favored males:

Well I would say that I recognize absolutely that in certain parts of the institutions, both schools and higher education, that there are glass ceilings. I have not experienced them. I have been lucky and so that's not to say that they don't exist... I also recognize that I have an ability I think to manage situations in ways that allow me to get the work done without compromising on my own principles and it has stood me well I think . . . I understand when we are marginalized but sometimes it's not a gendered issue, sometimes it's an issue of proximity to control, but I have not felt the opportunities for me have been hugely curtailed by the fact of my gender but I also realize that I am probably atypical in that sphere.

On a related point, Professor Niamh Masterson, again a dean, noted that while she recognized the existence of a masculinist competitive culture and a "glass escalator" which supported it, she managed to navigate it, subverting where viable the managerialist imperative:

You had all these alpha males and if you read these books on animal behavior you could see them, all the alpha males trying to be stronger than the next alpha male . . . looking into the future, looking into when there would be a presidential vacancy, setting themselves up against each other . . . I had no interest in that kind of behavior, and I watched them as men, and I suppose it you are a mother and you have been a teacher in a boys' school and you are watching boys shaping up to each other, that's exactly how senior men are. But I had no difficulty with it. I had good interpersonal skills and I would go and speak to them afterwards and I would negotiate positions, but I held my own.

She further commented: "universities are of their nature highly competitive institutions and you have to be tough." Resonating with earlier research on how women can work within the existing system in order to open up opportunities for other women, she noted that she actively appointed women "to counterbalance the almost entirely male environment" [48]. At the same time, there was a general recognition amongst the participants that the organizational culture of the university was premised on, as O'Connor has elsewhere noted, "male lifestyles and priorities" [48] (p. 310) replete with "strong imprints of masculine domination" [49] (p. 11). This culture, which the majority of participants in this study held, conflicted with their own core values and professional identities. The problem, they argued, was that such a culture fostered competition and rivalry between a small pool of women jostling for position in an increasingly hostile and combative work environment. On this, Professor Rachel Desmond stated:

I think because maybe it's so hard to get there or maybe because they are one of the few and they like it, I really don't know, but a lot of women I think pull the ladder up after them and superglue it and that's just not good.

She concluded by saying "I actually think women are a big part of the issue."

Consistent with a corpus of international research, professors hold a perspective that senior management in universities place little emphasis on one's caring responsibilities.

Mirroring results reported in the *corpus* of international research, the women professors who participated in this study were predominantly single, divorced, or sole parents [50]. Again, echoing the international research, the majority articulated a sense that, whether or not they had children, they were expected to behave in motherly ways, evoking a gender of caring in their work [51]. Despite the requirement to evoke a gender of caring in their professional role, however, they articulated a view that there obtained an almost complete absence of any dialogue within their professional contexts regarding their caring responsibilities outside of work. Hence, despite the enactment of a raft of gender equality legislation and the perceived promotion of family friendly policies, they were of the view that their work environments were structured according to an ideology premised on long hours, uninterrupted career paths, long periods of international exchange, and relocation according to career goals. This was particularly the case for those women who were in senior management roles. These views concur with those reported in Lynch's 2010 study that universities are constructed as 'carefree zones' and with the results of Ward and Wolf-Wendel's 2012 research in the US on the challenges for academic women who are also mothers [52,53].

In relation to the challenge of combining a senior management role with having a family, Professor Sheila O' Donoghue noted "women don't go up for those upper level jobs . . . you can't run your family at the same time." On a similar point, Professor Jill Reynolds stated: "originally, I did have the ambition to go for a management role, like dean or head of department, but to be honest, when I had my kids I just felt it's one or the other . . . I can't do both, at least, not properly." Professor Nadia Staunton,

a dean, recalled the challenges she faced returning from maternity leave: "I was breastfeeding when I went back to work, and I rang up to ask where the fridge was, and I was told, we can't guarantee you will have access to a fridge." Professor Sara Watters continued in a similar vein:

> *The hardest thing I have found is juggling my kids with my work . . . my own experience is that you simply cannot say you can't do something because you have to be at your kid's play or match . . . it just impacts further down the line. So, I tend to juggle, doing a lot of my work in the evenings and at week-ends. I get a lot of support from my extended family.*

She concluded by noting "otherwise, I would have packed it all in years ago."

A wide network of support was identified by a number of participants as being central to their capacity to continue with their career and also raise a family. This was particularly the case for those in senior management roles. On this, Professor Fiona Morris, a dean, noted:

> *Juggling children and a career wasn't a problem for me and I'm very lucky in that, and I can see it in my colleagues that yes it is. So I don't think I'm typical for two reasons. One of them being that I always had a very equal relationship with my husband. So maybe unequal in the other direction. He would always have done all of the cooking and all of the shopping, but also he felt as responsible for the children as I did. Also at the time when I became an academic, my children were already grown up . . . so it wasn't an issue for me. But it is an issue for others definitely, without a doubt.*

Similarly, Professor Susan Reilly stated: "my partner does a lot of the mopping up, the running around with the kids . . . he has the flexibility with his work . . . this allows me to continue to focus on my career." At the same time, it was evident from the participants' responses that the culture over the last 20 years had evolved somewhat, facilitated to some degree by the increase in the number of women now in academia. The majority had begun their careers in subject departments which were predominantly male. Professor Edel Ryan recalled "I was the first female hired in the department in seventeen years. I was the only one . . . everyone else I worked with was male. No male had more than two children and no male had a wife that worked." Similarly, Professor Fiona Morris noted: "when I started working at this university, the staff was predominantly male, and I would say a group of very vocal male colleagues controlled the whole discourse and what happened and what was valued." A number of participants expressed the view that the increase in the number of women in academia had been accompanied by more of an openness to recognizing their caring responsibilities. Reflecting on developments in this regard over the last two decades, Professor Denise Thompson noted:

> *What was said at the time was you had to go out and stand in the corridors and talk to people and be seen and be there at five o'clock in the evening when they are going for a drink and talk seriously. I mean the pretention was only wonderful . . . More women coming in it's a much easier environment to be in, it's a much easier environment to say "No, I have to go home now because my daughter is coming back" you can say that now. Twenty years ago you couldn't say it. You were really frowned upon for saying it.*

She continued by stating: "the modes of interaction have changed in my opinion, even on the corridor, because there's more women about." Nevertheless, Professor Thompson also reflected on the pressure to be visible, with visibility often being equated with demonstrating commitment, particularly in relation to promotion. Recalling the advice of a senior male colleague regarding promotion, she observed:

> *A senior person . . . kind of took me aside and said "X" (one of my colleagues who did get promoted) "works very hard, you know." I asked myself how do you know he works very hard? Well he knew that because X was always here in his office and could always be seen working very hard in there. And a woman who works very hard quite late at night at home, which is what I was doing, and couldn't be seen . . . I think that's actually very important.*

This issue of visibility at work was raised by a number of the women interviewed, particularly those in senior management roles. On this, Professor Nadia Staunton, a dean, observed: "I'm very aware of how conspicuous I am . . . When you are the only woman prof you are much more conspicuous." The challenge of ongoing visibility or presence and caring responsibilities was crystallized by Professor Susan Reilly when she commented as follows:

> *I just can't be there 24/7 as is the expectation. Like many other women, and indeed men, I have caring responsibilities which, to be honest, are my priority and I don't apologize for that. I don't think I should be judged on how much time I spend in my office or in the wider university.*

She concluded: "I should be judged on the entirety of my work, a lot of which I do at home, away from the public gaze of the university."

A common explanation for women's under-representation in senior layers of the academy is the fact that they have caring responsibilities. This assumption is, however, posited on heterosexual lifestyles and/or traditional gendered divisions of domestic labor [54]. It also fails to explain why women who are single or without caring responsibilities are also absent from senior positions in higher education. Alluding to the complexity of the issue, Professor Edel Ryan cautioned "seeing the family issue as the root of the problem would be a mistake . . . that tends to be quite a male response to a far more complex issue."

> *Professors hold a perspective concerning the importance of validation, selection and networks of support.*

Nurturing is considered central to legitimating women's occupancy of positions of power and thus reducing the tension between leadership and gender roles. Equally, much of the international research on gender and leadership suggests that women have been socialized to be agentic and collegial and thus they avoid self-promotion [5,33,55]. As a result, supportive climates and direct encouragement have been identified in the international body of research as being important in shaping women's decision-making around pursuing career opportunities. Networks, both formal and informal, and mentoring have also been identified as central to fostering women's career progression and ambition [8,43,56,57]. Being encouraged or head-hunted to apply for particular roles was identified by the women in this study, who often lacked the confidence to put themselves forward, as an important signifier. This, they said, proved critical to them, not only at the professional stage, but even earlier during their time as students. Those who did not have a history in their family of progression into post-graduate studies claimed that it was particularly so in their case. On this, Professor Gwen Matthews stated:

> *I remember a Professor saying to me in my first year had I ever thought about doing the PhD and I hadn't and it really was an extraordinary suggestion in my mind at that time. I didn't come necessarily from a family where people had done this level of advanced graduate work but when she put it in my head, it was a natural next step.*

Similarly, Professor Maeve O' Flaherty recalled:

> *I remember a professor at college saying to me you should do an MA and a PhD. When you haven't had people before you who have gone that route just how vital it is when somebody makes the intervention to say you have the ability and I think it's true for male and female students and it's probably maybe primarily a class issue but it is a gender issue as well I think . . . young women often need somebody, it could be male or female, to say to them you have the ability to go further' and it really was transformative.*

Commenting on the need for continued endorsement and validation, even at the professoriate stage, she further noted:

I needed somebody more senior to say to me 'you would be good at this' . . . I needed somebody senior to actually say 'you would be good at this' . . . I think it's partly socialization but I think it's also partly a trust that if the person is making that approach to you then they are also open to the sort of person you are . . . From a gender perspective I think it's really important because I think that in many cases women may not think it is worth applying or positive to apply.

She continued by stating: "I would have to say in my own educational practices I try to remember this."

Having networks of support, both formal and informal, were considered important by this cohort of women. These, according to Professor Nadia Staunton, proved particularly significant "for people who perceived themselves as outsiders." A number of participants alluded to the prevalence and impact of male networks which privileged and promoted their male colleagues. Resonating with the international research on the issue, they identified such networks as being a mechanism for gatekeeping and ensuring the reinforcement of the dominant hegemony [42,58]. On this, Professor Fiona Morris commented:

I don't think being a woman held me back, but I do think there are different support systems there for men that weren't there for me. What tended to happen here was that men who were seen to have something were identified fairly early on and were given quite a lot of visibility and quite a lot of support . . . it wasn't that there were barriers there, but what wasn't there was the early recognition, the kind of mentoring, and the promotion . . . that wasn't there.

Similarly, Professor Rachel Desmond noted: "I think they had networks that I probably would have despised, you know, whether they were football or golf or pub; just networks . . . I had friends, they had networks and now I know there's a difference and then I didn't." One participant spoke about setting up her own informal network to counter the prevalence of all-male networks. In this instance, the impetus to establish such a network stemmed from not being promoted. On this, Professor Maeve O' Flaherty recalled:

After not being promoted on that occasion, I set up an informal network which ran for a couple of years between myself and a number of other academics where we read each other's work and encouraged each other towards publication and I did it directly. So, I do believe in initiatives that enable people to support each other.

For a number of the other participants, being part of an already established network or community of other women provided them with a legitimate and protected space in which they could, as Professor Carol Dunne observed, "talk about challenging issues in a safe space." She further commented: "I think that's probably very important for anybody, but it's more important for women who are in the minority."

Mentoring was also identified as being important, with a number of participants recalling the importance of key mentors who had helped to shape their career. These included both male and female mentors. On this, Professor Rachel Desmond recalled: "not alone did I not have a mentor, I didn't know that I needed one. When I became dean, I got an external mentor coach and I specifically picked a man; and I remember saying to him 'What could I not have done if I had had this twenty years ago?'" Similarly, Professor Maeve O' Flaherty reflected: "I've had some really powerful male mentors, and actually probably more male mentors than female; though I have had some female ones as well; and I suppose one of the things that has been a feature of all of them is a commitment to excellence." Nonetheless, while there was broad support for mentoring and networking opportunities, there was an awareness of the complexity of both. Echoing results reported in the international literature, a number of women alluded to the way in which mentoring and networking could potentially work to perpetuate existing masculinist cultures by reinforcing the dominant hegemony [59]. On this, Professor Maeve O' Flaherty observed:

I also have a concern that it's really important as women academics that we don't create a kind of system of patronage that is gender specific ourselves. I think sometimes women can build very tight groups of female doctoral and post-doctoral students around them and I think it's important that that doesn't actually replicate or just invert old systems of patronage . . .

Similarly Professor Joyce Whelan noted:

I think a critical distance is important . . . a distance from the institution and the mission of that institution. Hence, while I am engaged in networks and have had a number of mentors over the years, I have sought these independently from the institution I have worked in and instead looked to my broader professional field for this kind of knowledge and support.

In concluding, she stated: "this has given me a kind of reflective space or lens which I have found invaluable in grounding me in the professional decisions I have made."

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to generate theory on the perspectives of women professors in Ireland on being a woman professor working in Irish universities in the period 2000–2017. The study, undertaken within the life story tradition, was based on interviews conducted with 21 women professors across the seven universities in the Republic of Ireland in faculties of Social Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Business. Four key themes were generated during the analysis of their testimony: they regarded universities as operating according to male-definitions of merit; they made a strategic choice not to engage in senior management roles; they considered there was no room for caring responsibilities in universities; and they emphasized the importance of validation, selection, and networks of support.

Disentangling what Morley refers to as 'the matrix of power relations in the academy' is a complex process and this study confirms that complexity [54]. While on the one hand, some progress was noted by the participants in terms of organizational cultures and processes, particularly the move away from clerical control and the increasing numbers of women in senior university roles, the emergence of a culture of new managerialism, which valorizes individualism, and competition, discounting collaboration and care commitments, was viewed by the majority as privileging male norms and male work practices. In line with research undertaken in other contexts, the women in this study were largely of the view that research, and in particular external funding, is prized above any other academic activity, with universities working towards private sector business norms [35,37]. Again, as has been argued elsewhere, this culture was considered to favor certain disciplines over others [25,60]. The fact that these are disciplines historically dominated by men led the women in this study to argue that women continue to be marginalized in the gendered research economy. They pointed to the gendered order of control which is deemed most explicit in the way in which certain roles and responsibilities, notably teaching, student support, and administration, are deemed to be more suited to women than to men; an observation that resonates with Smith's (1987) argument that women's invisible labor promotes men's authority [61]. Despite their opposition to the dominant organizational culture, however, the majority of the women in this study chose not to disengage from the academy, reflecting trends noted elsewhere [50]. Rather, they chose to disengage from the particular mission and culture of their university, and at the same time deepen their engagement with their professional role, in particular through their research. Indeed, the majority claimed that their professional identity, their sense of academic self, and their professional *raison d'être* were anchored in their identity as a scholar. Echoing research in other contexts, this sense of self as a scholar translated into a rejection of a management path, which was considered to endorse an organizational culture which reinforces and legitimates gender divisions [60]. Having said this, there were indications, in line with previous research, that some women professors, particularly those in management roles, used their position as 'outsider' and 'other' in order to act as change agents and support the progression of other women in the process [39].

A number of participants reflected on their caring responsibilities and how such responsibilities had an impact on their professional role and progression. On this, they echoed the results of previous research that the competitive nature of higher education leaves those with caring responsibilities at a disadvantage [62]. A number spoke about the pressure to be 'visible' with visibility being equated with commitment to the organization. While they recognized that pressure to be visible and present had decreased to some degree over time, they were still of the view that bringing caring responsibilities to work could have a damaging impact on one's profile and ultimately on one's career progression. Again, resonating with research in the international context, participants in this study indicated that the competitive, entrepreneurial nature of the modern university provides significant challenges for those with caring responsibilities, but particularly for mothers [63]. Networks of support, both formal and informal, emerged as important in this study as women increasingly recognized the value of forming intellectual communities which could act in supportive, advisory, and strategic ways. Such communities allowed women to work collaboratively, while at the same time providing them with key knowledge and guidance in relation to 'the rules of the game' [64]. Equally, being selected or singled out and explicitly encouraged to apply for promotion or senior positions was an important signifier for those women who lacked confidence and quite often the 'know-how.' This finding resonates with previous research both in the national context and internationally that women's lower confidence levels are influenced by a lack of collegial recognition and esteem [43,63]. Finally, there are indications that gender equality is now on the active agenda in a number of universities; however, while the policy imperative to promote gender equality presented opportunities for women, it was felt that the same policy allowed women to be used by the dominant group as tokens to legitimize the existing system, commodifying what Fitzgerald refers to as 'the cachet of women's diversity' [1] (p. 37). Ultimately, the study suggests that a cognitive dissonance continues to prevail when women occupy positions of power in academia [65]. As Professor Edel Ryan noted:

I think people are extremely uncomfortable with women with power. Women with power make people uncomfortable and that's a gender bias, because that's a gender norm that we don't expect. We don't expect women to have that kind of power. It violates our expectations.

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