Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership

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Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management

Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership: the case of Hong Kong

--Manuscript Draft--

Full Title:	Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership: the case of Hong Kong
Manuscript Number:	CJHE-2019-0157R1
Article Type:	Research Article
Keywords:	women academics; Leadership; equality; policy
Abstract:	The absence of women academics in the most senior ranks and leadership roles in higher education is both an international phenomenon and an enduring social justice issue. This article provides an original insight into the 'policy' response to the underrepresentation of women academics as senior leaders in three case-study universities in Hong Kong. Based on documentary analysis and interviews with 35 women academics, the research indicates: 'gaps' between institutions voicing a commitment to gender equality and actual practice; middle management being a 'sticking point' in bringing about cultural change; a lack of understanding by some male colleagues of the barriers women face in the profession; a rejection of positive or affirmative action by interviewees; and a policy context that is focused upon equal treatment.
Order of Authors:	Sarah Jane Aiston Chee Kent Wing Wah Law
Response to Reviewers:	<p>Ref.: Ms. No. CJHE-2019-0157</p> <p>Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership: the case of Hong Kong</p> <p>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</p> <p>Reviewers' comments:</p> <p>Reviewer #1: This is an interesting article and makes a useful contribution to the literature on the under-representation of women in university leadership. It draws on rich interview data.</p> <p>However, the article could be strengthened by being better contextualised within the vast literature on the topic and by considering, for example, the following:</p> <p>1. pp.2-3. The theoretical framing relies heavily on Rees (2007). It would be useful to look at Fitzgerald, T. and Wilkinson, J. (2010) Travelling towards a mirage? Gender, leadership & higher education, Post Pressed: Mt Gravatt, Australia; and White, K. and O'Connor, P. (eds.) (2017). Gendered Success in Higher Education, Palgrave: Basingstoke.</p> <p>Thank you to the reviewer for bringing my attention to this work.</p> <p>References to Fitzgerald and Wilkinson have been incorporated into the Theoretical Framing section (page 3) and throughout the paper – pages 5, 6, 8, 15, and 16.</p> <p>References to White and O'Connor have been incorporated on pages 13, 14, 15, 16.</p> <p>2. pp. 4 and ff. Profiles of gender equality promotion in the case study universities. Do any of these universities link achievements in gender equality to performance pay for senior managers.</p> <p>This information is not publicly available. Given that the Hong Kong system is only beginning to talk about gender equality, and has thus far shown a rather limited,</p>

rudimentary policy response, it is highly unlikely that senior managers' performance is linked to gender equality.

p. 5 HKU was committed to trebling the proportion of women in senior positions by 2020. Have they achieved this?

There has been no increase in the number of women in senior positions at HKU – this point has been added in (see p. 5)

p. 7 and ff. Discussion on middle management. See Moodie, G. (2002). Fish or Fowl? Collegial processes in managerial institutions, *Australian Universities Review* 45(2).

Thank you for this reference – now referred to on page 13 (discussion section)

p. 11 Discussion on family friendly policies and choice could benefit from reference to Padevic, I., Ely, R. and Reid, E. (2019). Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: the work-family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219832310>

Thank you for this reference – now referred to on page 5, 12, 15.

p. 13 standpoint theory should have been introduced earlier.

Reference to standpoint theory has now been introduced on page 8.

Reviewer #2:

This paper is a well-researched and documented case study of research intensive universities in Hong Kong. It documents the gaps between policy and practice and explores, with 35 female interviewees attitudes towards policy and action, affirmative action and meritocracy. Insight is provided into institutional decision-making and inhibitors to change, especially at the middle-management level.

It provides important insight into a specific system, but the key components of the analysis are clearly widely applicable.

The strongest component of the paper is the opening section which identifies the problem and articulates identified factors and experience in the literature.

The analysis of the interviews, and the narrative documentation provided to give voice to women, could be strengthened by greater reference to the relevant literature, especially that which identifies enabling strategies and interventions. This would strengthen the case for the global relevance of the research.

Thank you for your constructive comments.

In addition to the literature highlighted by Reviewer 1, the following references have also now been added in:

Johnson, K. A., Warr, D. J., Hegarty, K., & Guillemin, M. (2015). Small wins: an initiative to promote gender equity in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 37(6), 689-701.

Morley, L. (2014). Lost leaders: women in the global academy. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1), 114-128.

Pribbenow, C. M., Sheridan, J., Winchell, J., Benting, D., Handelsman, J., & Carnes, M. (2010). The Tenure Process and Extending the Tenure Clock: The Experience of Faculty at One University. *Higher Education Policy*, 23(1), 17-38.

Timmers, T. M., Willemsen, T. M., & Tijdens, K. G. (2010). Gender diversity policies in universities: a multi-perspective framework of policy measures. *Higher Education*, 59(6), 719-735.

van den Brink, M., & Benschop, Y. (2012). Slaying the Seven-Headed Dragon: The Quest for Gender Change in Academia. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 19(1), 71-92. The incorporation of these additional references has further strengthened the analysis of the data. Where appropriate in the text enabling strategies and interventions have been referred to, for example:

	<p>P. 5 To move the focus beyond interventions that coalesce around the work-family narrative.</p> <p>P.7 The importance of equality as key performance indicator and the monitoring and tracking of gender equality initiatives to ensure sustainable change.</p> <p>P.7-8 In reference to feminist organisational theory the need for organisational change on a number of levels, including the symbolic level, organisational practices and the values level.</p>
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Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership: the case of Hong Kong

Keywords: Women academics, leadership, equality, policy

Abstract

The absence of women academics in the most senior ranks and leadership roles in higher education is both an international phenomenon and an enduring social justice issue. This article provides an original insight into the ‘policy’ response to the underrepresentation of women academics as senior leaders in three case-study universities in Hong Kong. Based on documentary analysis and interviews with 35 women academics, the research indicates: ‘gaps’ between institutions voicing a commitment to gender equality and actual practice; middle management being a ‘sticking point’ in bringing about cultural change; a lack of understanding by some male colleagues of the barriers women face in the profession; a rejection of positive or affirmative action by interviewees; and a policy context that is focused upon equal treatment.

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women academics in the most senior ranks and leadership roles in higher education is both an international phenomenon and an enduring social justice issue. But our knowledge of the challenges and barriers women face in progressing within the profession has advanced significantly in recent decades.

Research indicates that selection processes within the academy remain highly gendered, thereby limiting academic women’s career advancement (Husu, 2004; van den Brink et. al., 2010). Academic women find difficulties in accessing elite male networks (Tessens, White and Web, 2011). However, such networks are critical to career advancement, particularly when recruitment and selection processes are not always transparent (Riordan, 2011).

Gender stereotyping impacts on the work women are seen as best placed to undertake (Morley, 2007; Schein, 2007; Turner, 2002) and this work keeps women in the ‘ivory’ basement, with minimal reward or recognition (Fitzgerald, 2014). Women particularly face challenges in the research prestige economy of higher education. Women publish less, probably as a consequence of gendered academic workloads (Aiston and Jung, 2015a; Tower, et. al., 2007), are less likely to be on the editorial boards of major journals (Kennedy, Lin and Dickstein, 2001), and suffer from gender bias in the evaluation of research excellence (Monroe et. al., 2008).

The academy is positioned as a ‘carefree workplace’ (Morley, 2013). The ideal academic is depicted as the dedicated individual (Deem, 2003; Jacobs, 2008). Women academics, therefore, particularly face challenges negotiating professional and domestic life (Probert, 2005).

The ‘think leader, think male’ attitude privileges masculine values, thereby

making it difficult for academic women to negotiate their identities as female leaders (Acker, 2012; Biling, 2011). Women who exhibit privileged ‘masculine’ traits, such as ambition or assertiveness, are seen as difficult or ‘unfeminine’ (Aiston, 2015b). There is evidence to suggest that in highly masculine organizational cultures women are rejecting leadership roles (Morley and Crossouard, 2016).

But what is being done? Addressing gender inequality in academia and enabling academic women to progress is a key responsibility of universities (Bagilhole, 2000). Policy responses, acknowledging that there is a problem regarding gender equality in higher education, are evident in Europe and the United States (Sagaria, 2007; Caprile et al. 2012).

The aim of this article is to gain an insight into the ‘policy’ response to the absence of women academics as senior leaders in Hong Kong. It asks: how, and to what extent, are universities in Hong Kong supporting the career progression of women academics and their attainment of senior leadership roles? Research has shown that women are woefully underrepresented in the most senior leadership roles in the Hong Kong sector (Aiston and Yang, 2017a). They publish less, receive less external funding, spend more time on teaching than their male colleagues, and are less likely to be on the tenure track (Aiston, 2014). This research is positioned theoretically as part of a broader challenge to the norm of using Western experience as the referent for all experience (Mohanty, 1988).

The Hong Kong Context

Hong Kong currently has eight institutions publicly funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Relative to its size, this is an incredibly strong sector in terms of world rankings at both institutional and disciplinary levels. For example, four out of the eight universities are ranked in the QS World University Rankings’ top 50 (2018). The sector is associated with quality.

The gender equality legal requirements in Hong Kong result from by two ordinances. The 1995 Sexual Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) protects against discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, pregnancy, or marital status. Per the SDO (Section 48), employers may take positive actions to ensure equal opportunities for persons of a particular sex or marital status, or who are pregnant. The 1997 Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FDSO) protects against discrimination based on family status, ensuring employees who must care for their children or elderly parents are not disadvantaged (EOC, c.2009). In addition, the government encourages employers to adopt family-friendly practices, such as paternal leave and flexible work arrangements (Siu & Phillips, 2006).

Theoretical Framing

Policy is defined in the broadest sense herein, and is seen as both ‘an attempt to solve problems and an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action’ (Ward et. al., 2015). The theoretical framing for this research is policy implementation dynamics (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). This includes an analysis of the ‘enactment stage’, concerning how policy is turned into action (Schofield,

2004), an exploration of any ambiguity and conflict inherent in the policy arena (Martland, 1995), and a study of the role of actors in implementation processes and change agency (Callerstig, 2014).

Contrasted policy approaches are as follows: equal treatment, positive action, and mainstreaming gender equality. Equal treatment sets out a legal framework that ensures the equal treatment of men and women. Rees (2007) argues that in equal treatment practices in higher education women are not treated *equally*, but are treated the *same* as men; ‘in effect, crudely put, women can succeed in academic life provided they behave like men’ (p. 15). **In equality of treatment approaches women’s difference – to men – is constructed as a disadvantage that requires remedial action, with women located as a ‘policy problem’ (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010).** Positive action measures are based on the acknowledgement that there are differences between men and women. The intention is to create a level-playing field, but Rees cautions that such actions are mechanisms, again, to make women more like men. **Values and work practices remain both unchanged and unchallenged (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010).** Finally, mainstreaming gender equality can be described as ‘the promotion of gender equality through its systematic integration into all systems and structures, into all policies, processes, and procedures, into the organization and its culture, into ways of seeing and doing’ (Rees, 2007, p. 16).

Method

Three out of the eight UGC universities in Hong Kong were chosen as case studies: University of Hong Kong (HKU), Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). These three universities have been traditionally regarded as Hong Kong’s ‘research-intensive’ institutions and are classified as world leading in international league tables. The rationale for focusing on these three universities was a working assumption that in highly competitive research intensive environments, academic women might well face even greater barriers to their career progression. Table 1 shows data on academics’ rank and gender across the faculties of Science, Business, Engineering and Arts and Social Sciences at the case study universities (Aiston and Yang, 2017a). Data at this level of detail is not publicly available in Hong Kong.

Table 1: Case-study institutions by academic rank and gender (Aiston and Yang, 2017a)

Institution	Rank Gender	Professor	Associate professor	Assistant Professor	Lecturers & Instructors
Hong Kong University	Women	25 (13.4%)	35 (18.1%)	73 (36.5%)	104 (53.9%)
	Men	161 (86.6%)	158 (81.9%)	127 (63.5%)	89 (46.1%)
HKUST	Women	16 (6.9%)	20 (15.7%)	31 (25.4%)	62 (52.1%)
	Men	215 (93.1%)	107 (84.3%)	91 (74.6%)	57 (47.9%)
CUHK	Women	32 (12.1%)	46 (25.3%)	55 (31.3%)	76 (42.2%)
	Men	233	136	121	104

		(87.9%)	(74.7%)	(68.7%)	(57.8%)
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The first stage of the research was a documentary analysis of the policies, initiatives and strategies that had been put in place to support women academics in Hong Kong in the case-study institutions. Documents can ‘tell us about the aspirations and intentions of the period to which they belong’ (May, 2001, p. 176). The aim was to get an indication of the aspirational and formal commitments of the institutions to gender equality, and to consider the extent to which the career progression of women academics and their achievement of senior leadership roles was regarded as a university priority. Each university website was analysed, along with any corresponding documents, to provide an insight into the visible, public indications of the institution’s commitment to equality.

The second stage of the research comprised semi-structured interviews with women academics from the case study institutions. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their understanding of any particular strategies, policies or initiatives in their own institution, and if they regarded them as beneficial/effective. They were asked to consider to what extent they saw their own institution as committed to, and being proactive in, promoting and supporting women into senior academic roles. The intention was to understand their perception of their institution’s approach to supporting academic women. In placing women’s testimony as central, we are embracing the approach taken by scholars in politics and development studies who argue that repoliticising gender entails creating space for marginalised groups to express their voices in order to further gender equality goals (Lomardo, Meier and Verloo, 2017). The lead author has previously interviewed senior male leaders in the sector, including the three Vice-Chancellors/Presidents of the case-study universities.

The sample was stratified by two key variables: academic rank and discipline. 35 interviews were conducted, involving 13 (17% of) academic women employed in science and engineering and 22 (22% of) women working in social sciences and humanities. For the purposes of anonymity the universities will be referred to as UA, UB, and UC when interviewees are quoted.

The analysis adopted a three-stage coding approach (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). First, basic coding was carried out. Second, attention was given to the content of what was said, to generate themes to reflect the language interviewees used. Third, abstraction from what the interviewees had said took place to aid the creation of broad analytic themes.

Case-study University Profiles of Gender Equality Promotion

CUHK had established a task force on women and family friendly policies, with the aim ‘to promote a working environment that is responsive to the needs of women and colleagues with family responsibilities’ (CUHK, 2016b). The University had put in place ‘gender sensitive’ and ‘family-friendly’ policies and practices, including improving on-campus family-friendly facilities, flexible work arrangements and maternity and paternity leave. The target beneficiaries were primarily women

1 with family responsibilities, reflecting an underlying assumption that family is a key
2 barrier to women academics' career progression. A committee against sexual
3 harassment had also been established. The University's mission statement did not
4 refer to a commitment to gender equality. However, the President's blog signaled an
5 awareness of the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. The
6 President focused on family as a significant barrier to career progression, but
7 acknowledged that the issue is complicated and that equally qualified women may not
8 be given the same opportunities as their male colleagues to enter leadership positions
9 (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016a).

11 HKUST had identified diversity and inclusion broadly as a core institutional
12 value (HKUST, 2016a). The University had established a gender discrimination
13 committee and created a university policy on sexual harassment. Equal opportunity
14 statements were evident in job advertisements, along with a commitment to diversity:
15 'The University is committed to increasing the diversity of its faculty and has a range
16 of family-friendly policies in place' (The Hong Kong University of Science and
17 Technology, 2016b). The linguistic link between diversity and 'family-friendly
18 policies' suggests again an institutional understanding that family is key barrier to
19 women's progression in the profession. A 'Women's Faculty Association' had also
20 been formed with the primary aim to 'actively promote a diverse, inclusive, equitable
21 and intellectually vibrant environment' (HKUST, 2016c). The association emphasised
22 their role in supporting the Provost's 'initiatives related to work/ family issues, to
23 diversity recruitment, to improve campus culture and gender diversity policy
24 formulation.'

30 HKU's strategic development plan broadly signaled a commitment to diversity
31 and equal opportunities (HKU, 2016a). Gender was not specifically referred to in the
32 University's mission. However, equal opportunity statements were evident in job
33 advertisements. These ranged from simple equal opportunity statements, to more
34 inclusive versions that particularly encouraged women, members of underrepresented
35 groups and those with disabilities (HKU, 2016b). An Equal Opportunities Unit assists
36 the University in creating an equal opportunity environment. The primary focus of the
37 Unit appeared to be on sexual harassment and professional conduct. The University
38 had also become one of ten impact champions for the United Nations *HeForShe*
39 campaign, with a commitment to 'champion a common target to treble the proportion
40 of women' in the most senior positions of the University by 2020 (UN Women,
41 2016). In 2019, the number of women in first-tier leadership roles – at the level of
42 Dean and above – has not changed. In 2016 three (16.67%) women held senior
43 leadership roles, and this figure remains the same.

48 It was evident from this analysis that the 'policy response' had a focus on
49 family, suggesting that institutions' understanding of the barriers academic women
50 face coalesced around caring responsibilities. A women as carer discourse is willingly
51 adopted by universities, as it fits within the prevailing hegemonic view within society
52 of women as caregivers. Such policies signal that this issue is gaining overdue
53 attention, and are a significant step towards equity, however, women's traditional role
54 is reinscribed (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). This dominant explanation for
55 women's lack of career progression, and interventions tailored to this explanation,
56 simplifies the problem (Padavic, Ely and Reid, 2019) and offers a narrow range of
57 'subject locations' for women' in policy terms (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). We

also saw a commitment to ‘equal opportunities’ and dealing with sexual harassment. HKU appeared publicly to be more active in proposing targets for increasing the number of senior women in the University. However, the analysis of publicly available data may not capture all that the universities are doing.

From talking to action, from policy to practice

The interviewees identified ‘gaps’ in relation to supporting and enabling women academics’ career trajectories. These ‘gaps’ manifested themselves in a variety of forms: for example, gaps between sentiment and actual policies, and gaps between policies and actual practice. The following quotation pinpoints the importance of translating words into policy:

[I]t’s not enough to just have the sentiment. It’s not enough to say ‘I’m really gender-sensitive and if a woman comes to me and says “I have x, y, z issues” then I will do everything possible’. That is not enough ... you need policy ... [so] a woman doesn’t have to feel like she is asking a favour. She needs to know that it is her right. (13, AssistP, UB).

Interviewees expressed frustration at a lack of action. References were made to the absence of ‘concrete implementation’ following a ‘broad campaign’ to support women academics (14, AssistP, UA), ‘sensitivities’ not in fact translating into actual policies (24, AssistP, UA) and discussions not turning into plans (32, Prof, UB). For one interviewee, their university’s position was one of ‘caring’ about the ‘gender balance’, but taking no action (2, Prof, UA), **which we might refer to institutional ‘speech acts’ (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010)**. No evidence of change at the departmental level was also raised (14, AssistP, UA). As one interviewee commented ‘I’m not sure senior management knows its audience well ... It’s not that well informed about what’s happening at the street level’ (26, Prof, UA), whilst another called on senior management to hold faculties and departments accountable for change (2, Prof, UA). In the following quotation, the interviewee is reflecting on the lack of women in her own department and the resultant issues in not having a community of women:

[T]he first thing I need is community and real community, not the department head making a nice speech once a year, saying how he supports women, or the Provost giving a nice speech every now and then. I mean that is all lip-service right? ... It doesn’t actually translate to daily, everyday support. (15, AssistP, UB)

Leading on from this point, the following quotation provides an insight into the challenges involved in and barriers to appointing more women:

I know that in recent hiring rounds, they’ve been told to try to be more diverse...but in reality when people are evaluating or discussing the candidates, people are still saying like ‘Yeah, but her work is not that interesting’.... There was one female candidate ... I thought she will be a nice addition to the division. When I talked to other colleagues they were like ‘Yeah, but her work is too traditional, it’s not interesting enough ... there are

other candidates who are better', but all those candidates are male ... (12, AssistP, UB)

O'Connor and O'Hagan's (2016) study of academic excellence highlights the subjective construction of 'excellence', involving women being seen as the problem.

Interviewees articulated cynicism as to whether change would actually come. In relation to increasing the number of women senior leaders, one interviewee commented 'they try...but do they try hard enough?' (6, AssistP, UA). Another interviewee reflected on good intentions, in the form of initiatives or a task force, taking up a lot of time, but not solving the problem (33, AssistP, UC). The following quotation raises an important point, concerning institutional drivers and tokenism:

I think the driving force is really the universities are desperate to get higher up the rankings ... It is not being driven by a real desire to have female input ... It is tokenism. (30, Prof, UC)

This point emphasises the importance of incorporating equality as a key performance indicator in quality audits, including international league tables (Morley, 2014). In addition, the ongoing monitoring and tracking of gender equality initiatives is essential to ensure sustainable change occurs (Johnson, et al., 2015).

Whilst interviewees highlighted 'gaps' in bringing about change, they also reflected on the centrality of changing mindsets; 'I guess it's important to change people's mindset, otherwise it's hard to change' (10, AssistP, UA). Male colleagues were described as not seeing or understanding the challenges academic women face and their lack of representation in senior leadership roles. One interviewee commented 'You make the men change the attitude' (20, Prof, UB), whilst another stressed it:

is about culture. It is very difficult to create like a policy or a strategy to overcome this ... They don't think there is a problem ... Our School have this Equal Opportunity Committee ... but I don't think it will create any changes. (28, AssistP, UC)

For one interviewee, it was not simply a matter of integrating policies and practices into an existing framework, but more a case of rewriting the entire *game*:

And when you ask us to play the game that has been set up by men, play by the rules of men, then obviously we're not motivated to play. It's not because we're not capable, it's because it's a stupid game right? ... So the people who have created the game in the first place have to be made aware that they have to change the game, change the rules. (15, AssistP, UB)

Feminist organisational theorists argue that a deep-rooted change to organizational culture needs to incorporate the following three aspects; the symbolic level, which signals what is important and valued in the organisation; organizational practices, that is behaviour embedded in systems and structures; and the values layer, which refers to deeply held beliefs and attitudes:

1 Like a mirage, they (*EEO policies*) beckon all to drink from the pool of equity,
2 but fail to deliver at the organizational and values layers of universities, what
3 has been promised at the symbolic organizational level (Fitzgerald and
4 Wilkinson, 2010, p. 138):
5

6 The data presented above, and also below, suggests the case-study universities are
7 largely operating at a symbolic level.
8
9

10 **Sticking points: the role of middle management**

11
12 Our research highlights a further significant issue, which higher education leaders and
13 policy makers need to consider when making recommendations and implementing
14 policies. This issue relates to a top-down approach, and the role of middle
15 management in making the changes happen (Mergaert, 2012). Interviewees discussed
16 pro-active senior leaders (2 UA, 4&5 UB, and 33 UC), but questioned how this would
17 translate further down the organizational hierarchy:
18
19

20 I know there's many things happening at University level, but how is it
21 trickling down to the department itself? (9, AssistP, UA)
22
23

24 Interviewees indicated that middle management were a problem in relation to
25 implementing policies and recommendations made by senior leaders. *This finding*
26 *resonates with Timmers et. al's (2019) study of the efficacy of gender equality*
27 *measures in the Netherlands; departments did not always comply with suggestions, or*
28 *even directives, from University Boards.* A key issue was that middle managers were
29 perceived as not understanding the challenges facing women academics:
30
31

32 Why do we not have more women? ... The senior leadership is very proactive,
33 ... but all the people in the middle don't really get it, don't really understand
34 why change is necessary or how change can be made. (13, AssistP, UB)
35
36

37 Interviewees discussed the challenges in implementing change in an organizational
38 culture in which middle management did not see the need for change:
39
40

41 And the problem is there's a whole level below him, some get it and some
42 don't ... And also, you know, Provosts come and Provosts go ... so unless the
43 whole culture builds around ... I don't know how long-lasting the effects will
44 be. (4, Prof, UB)
45
46

47 Moreover, this lack of understanding translated into discriminatory behaviour:
48
49

50 Actually a lot of these department chairs think there's no gender problem.
51 They're in total denial. They showed up to this meeting and they make sexist
52 comments. They laugh and giggle about the idea of like needing special
53 support for female faculty ... absolutely disgusting some of the behaviour, they
54 believe it's fundamentally unfair to favour female faculty over male faculty.
55 (17, AssocP, UB)
56
57

58 Here standpoint theory seems to be particularly relevant. Standpoint theory posits that
59 location in a social structure influences a person's view of the social world. As
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members of a privileged group, men – in this instance, male academics – have relatively little experience of discrimination or prejudice, and are therefore less likely to be aware of structural barriers. They are less likely than women to believe gender discrimination exists (Konrad and Hartman, 2002). The latter point raised in the above quotation, namely a perception that it is unfair to ‘favour’ female faculty, is one to which we shall return when considering the Hong Kong context. As O’Neil et al. (2008) discuss, women will continue to face challenges in the workplace when individual attitudes and perceptions do not keep pace with organisational change. A genuine and ‘lived commitment’ to the values of equity and diversity, promoted through practice at a *local* level is essential for gender initiatives to succeed (Johnson, et al., 2015).

As discussed earlier in the article and supported by previous research (Callerstig, 2014), individuals are central to bringing about change, and this is particularly significant in relation to the role of head of department. Interviewees spoke of the variability of heads implementing equality. One interviewee commented that the department head sets the ‘tone’, further noting ‘...so I think it’s quite decentralized, I’m not sure I could say that there’s an overarching culture (*of gender sensitivity*)’ (32, Prof, UB). Another interviewee provided a specific example of this variability:

You know women are supposed to get teaching relief [as a result of their maternity leave] ... Some department chairs don’t give relief, they give deferral ... ultimately it’s up to the department chairs to enforce them (17, AssocP, UB)

Thus our research demonstrates a ‘mismatch’ between the aspirations of university policy makers and what is happening on the ground (street level implementation).

It is also clear that many members of staff, particularly middle managers, are not taking the opportunity to attend events in relation to gender equity: ‘the irony is people who need that kind of training do not come’ (23, AssocP, UA). Similar issues were found in Doherty and Manfredi’s (2009) study; engaging managers in gender awareness workshops proved challenging, with resistance not uncommon and discussions in relation to gender and leadership in the academy seeming like a ‘distant target indeed’ (p.152). Research indicates, however, the importance of such learning and developmental activities, particularly in circumstances where men are more likely to discount discriminatory practices than women. Hence knowing who should be the target of such development and getting these people committed is far more important than simply facilitating such events (Davies, Healey and Cliffe, 2016). Here capacity and learning implementation instruments might be particularly helpful in providing ‘resources, knowledge and skills to catalyse and coordinate the actions of individual policy actors’ (Engeli and Mazur, 2018, p. 115). This view was articulated by one of our interviewees:

At some point, I think the change has to come from the one who thinks that there are no differences between men and women, and the difference should come from the men who think that there are no difference between men and women. (6, AssistP, UA)

1 This also suggests that appointing candidates with a greater awareness and
2 commitment to diversity and inclusion issues is crucial. A starting point would be to
3 include such criteria in job descriptions (Doherty and Manfredi, 2005).

4
5 Interviewees also reflected on the challenges of a ‘top-down’ approach.
6 Reference was made to trying to ‘convince’ deans and heads of department and the
7 need to engage/mobilise colleagues (21, Prof, UA). As one interviewee commented:
8 ‘...so have a grassroots effort to make the message stronger rather than having a
9 downward message, having a bottom-up message.’ (26, Prof, UA). Here the case can
10 be made for empowering gender-based groups to be actively engaged in the policy
11 process (Verloo, 2005); in the case-study universities this would include: Women
12 Studies Research Centre, HKU; Gender Research Centre, CUHK; and Women’s
13 Faculty Association, HKUST.

14 15 16 17 **Lowering standards? Affirmative action and meritocracies**

18
19 When considering how to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles, a
20 number of interviewees expressed unease at providing targeted support for women,
21 particularly in relation to affirmative action or positive action. As one interviewee
22 commented ‘the affirmative action thing is very controversial’ (12, AssistP, UB). This
23 finding is contrary to previous research in which women academics’ viewed targeted
24 support as desirable (Doherty and Manfredi, 2009). Concerns were raised around
25 women’s career progression being seen by others as a consequence of their sex: ‘Oh
26 she got promoted because she is a woman’ (20, Prof, UB); ‘other people say it
27 (*affirmative action*) is unfair’ (7, AssistP, UC). For one interviewee treating women
28 ‘differently’ would encourage people to think of women *as* different and for her this
29 was problematic; ‘It’s not serving them ... anybody who is hired should be hired on
30 merit’ (9, AssistP, UA). This comment resonates with Molla’s and Cuthbert’s (2014)
31 point that prejudicial attitudes towards women are such that affirmative action
32 policies are considered to be a confirmation of the inferiority of women. Proactively
33 looking for senior women was seen as a lowering of standards (32, Prof, UB) and this
34 was in direct opposition to an understanding of career progression as a result of a
35 meritocratic system:
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41 And then when hiring, we definitely look for the best person, so if a man turns
42 out to be much better, better than a female, then we don’t have this policy of
43 giving the female a priority. (8, AssocP, UC)

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45
46 There was a strong sense that ‘everything must be on merit’. Affirmative action was
47 seen as neither realistic nor in the best interests of an institution (26, Prof, UA),
48 presumably since this would be perceived as a lowering of standards. The following
49 quotation exemplifies a belief in a meritocratic system:
50

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52 In the United States, they have this kind of disclaimer ... all openings, they
53 welcome actually female, non-white ... you know to apply. I don’t think that
54 is necessary, but just that everyone should be sort of measured and evaluated
55 by an open system. (24, AssistP, UA).

56
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58 Interestingly, interviewee 8 began to question the presence of a meritocracy when
59 asked further about staff being hired/promoted on merit,:

1 It's also the kind of culture that when people look at two candidates, a man
2 and a woman, they don't do it intentionally, but maybe they subconsciously
3 think the man is more suitable for this kind of role ... not only the Chinese
4 culture, across the world. (8, AssocP, UC)
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7 Despite this, the interviewee continued to revert back to concerns that quotas would
8 force the university to hire or promote unqualified (or poorly qualified) individuals.
9 Ambiguity was evident throughout this interviewee's thinking on this issue; 'I have
10 very mixed feelings about having some special support for females'.
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13 However, the relation between a belief in a meritocratic system and the system
14 actually being meritocratic was questioned by other interviewees:
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17 The dean said 'But we need to hire the best people', without seeming to be
18 aware at all of the libraries of research that show this concept of hiring the best
19 person is heavily weighed by who is doing the hiring ... They are so blinded
20 that they don't realize they have to take extra careful precautions and
21 measures in the hiring practices. (29, Prof, UA)
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24 Brink and Benschop (2012) discuss biased decision-making in academic
25 appointments as of the one of the heads of the 'seven-headed dragon' of gender
26 inequality in the academy. The role of full Professor is constructed as too much for
27 women as carers, leadership is equated with masculinity and women's qualities are
28 systematically undervalued. The existence of 'transparent' and 'accountability'
29 policies do not negate, but rather veil inequality practices; e.g. preferred male
30 candidates are already selected. Brink and Benschop call for organizational reflection
31 upon recruitment and selection processes, including gender awareness training for
32 committee members, which is implemented in actual practice; 'attention should thus
33 go to the incorporation of gender awareness into the messy realities of actual
34 professional appointments' (Brink and Benschop, 2012, p.87).
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40 **Family-friendly policies?** 41

42 The interviewees largely identified university support, when it occurred, as focusing
43 on family-related concerns. This support was seen as somewhat problematic. For
44 example, the following interviewee expressed anxiety as to how her department views
45 her pregnancy, and in particular if she will extend her tenure clock:
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47

48 I need to be a little bit concerned about when and whether I need to extend my
49 tenure clock, and how my department thinks about my pregnancy ...
50 Personally I feel sometimes a little bit uncomfortable. (10, AssistP, UA)
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53 Relatedly, and potentially providing a rationale for the above interviewee's anxiety,
54 another interviewee commented:
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57 If they give you an extra year on the tenure clock when they evaluate you,
58 how do they relax their standard in a way that is fair to you without making it
59 feel like 'Oh, we're just giving her tenure because she is a woman'? So I think
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1 the profession struggles with that sort of thing and women don't feel
2 comfortable. (13, AssistP, UB)

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4 This level of unease, relating to how academic women who take career breaks are
5 viewed, is consistent with previous research (Pribbenow, 2010); for example, breaks
6 are misinterpreted as a woman's lack of devotion to their career, and particularly their
7 research (Dever and Morrison, 2009). Also maternity leave and tenure clock
8 extension have been seen as failing to take into account gendered family dynamics
9 (Loumansky, Goodman and Jackson, 2007):
10

11 I would say if Mummy get one year, Daddy should just have half a year. Or
12 Daddy has one year, Mummy should have two years. It's definitely totally
13 different levels of input. (3, AssocP, UC)
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17 Interviewee 10 explained the consequences of her maternity leave; rather worryingly
18 she referred to having to 'make-up' the teaching she will be unable to do. Similarly, a
19 colleague in a different University also made reference to female faculty having to
20 make up all their teaching when returning from maternity leave. This interviewee
21 went on to note that she believed that the University had changed this policy, but
22 comments:
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24

25 I think those are not really successes ... It just corrected a wrong ... I mean
26 when a man had cancer and then took one year of leave and when the man
27 came back, they didn't have to double their teaching! (20, Prof, UB)
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30 In this context maternity leave had been a double-edged sword, described as a
31 research 'penalty'; 'if you have to catch up on all your teaching, you don't have time
32 to do your research, right?' (4, Prof, UB)
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35 Interviewees also pointed out the limited focus on 'family-friendly' policies
36 (15, UB; 30, UC; 22, UA). The emphasis on 'family friendly' policies from a policy
37 outcome perspective can be seen as accommodating or compensating for traditional
38 gender relations, instead of transforming them; organizational support is provided for
39 accommodating the female role of primary caregiver with economic independence
40 (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). 'Think women's issues, think family-friendly initiatives'
41 fails to respond to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the barriers academic
42 women face in the academy, as evidenced by previous research and women
43 themselves in Hong Kong (Aiston, 2017b). The focus on caring responsibilities as the
44 primary explanatory factor for women's lack of progression in the academy is taking
45 attention away from structural and systemic discriminatory practices *within* the
46 profession (Aiston and Jung, 2015a). The dominant 'work-family' narrative leads to
47 policy responses focused on work-family accommodations. Evidence suggests,
48 however, that such policy responses have done little to advance women's careers and
49 paradoxically have 'often hurt them by offering off-ramps that stigmatize users and
50 derail their careers' (Padavic, Ely and Reid, 2019).
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56 The Situation in Hong Kong

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58 Our research indicates that from the interviewees' perspective all three institutions are
59 at the early stages of promoting/supporting academic women's career advancement.
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References were made to a ‘kind of awareness’ (7, AssistP, UC), a ‘realisation’ (9, AssistP, UA), and to institutions starting to face the issue. This growing awareness was viewed positively, but was not interpreted as institutions being especially proactive at this stage.

There was a sense that there is a long way to go (34, AssistP, UC) and a hope that an infrastructure would follow ‘sooner rather than later, because the more we wait, the more we are actually wasting a generation of women who could have been leaders’ (2, Prof, UA).

This next quotation leads us to another issue, namely providing support to marginalised groups *in order* to bring about equity:

It’s not basically really distinguishing a person based on the gender, so in one sense you don’t really discriminate [against] women, but in the other sense you’re also not giving them [women] any extra ... (7, AssistP, UC)

For a number of interviewees in one institution, this point was particularly relevant to the Hong Kong context, and in relation to the SDO. The ordinance seems to have been interpreted as a legal barrier to creating a level-playing field for women, including any action that is seen to particularly support one group over another, as the following quotation illustrates:

...she and I pitch to the provost [a leadership programme for women] and he said in Hong Kong, we can’t have any kind of programmes that are specially targeting one group or another. It’s illegal ... It’s affirmative action or something right? (17, AssocP, UB)

This interviewee goes on to comment:

I think we need policies that favour certain groups over others in order to create the level playing field.

Similarly, another interviewee noted:

In Hong Kong if we do anything everybody will say ‘Oh that’s against the discrimination ordinance’ ... which is ridiculous because there is discrimination built into the system (4, Prof, UB)

However, the SDO does permit positive action, whereby an act targeting persons of a particular sex is reasonably intended to ensure that those persons have equal opportunities.

Discussion

The documentary analysis of the policies, initiatives and strategies of the three-case study universities indicated that the underrepresentation of women academics as senior leaders was not publicly flagged as part of the institutions’ mission statements or strategic development. **The centrality of gender to the purpose of the organisation was absent (White and O’Connor, 2017).** Interviewees, however, highlighted a

number of significant issues in relation to supporting the career advancement of women academics, suggesting a need for organisational cultural change. Modifications of an institution's mission or a repriorisation of institutional goals is seen as an important aspect of organisational cultural change in higher education (Baughan, 2012; Coman and Bonciu, 2016).

The interviewees identified 'gaps' between institutions voicing a commitment to gender equality and actual practice. In relation to implementation dynamics this represents an issue at the 'enactment stage' (Schofield, 2004). This finding resonates with previous research (Monroe et. al., 2008; Timmers et. al., 2019; Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). The interviewees pinpointed middle management as a potential 'sticking point' in bringing about cultural change. Here the concept of policy 'enactment' is particularly helpful in theorizing this point; enactment refers to an understanding that policies are interpreted and 'translated' by diverse actors rather than simply implemented. Enactment is dependent on whether a policy is mandated, recommended or suggested and '...putting policies into practice is a creative, sophisticated and complex process that is always also located in a particular context and place' (Braun, Maguire and Ball, p. 549). Middle management is routinely observed as the crucial interface between policy and implementation in most large organisations (Moodie, 2002). Whilst most policies are decided at university level, the cooperation of departments is urgently needed (Timmers et. al., 2019).

The interviewees questioned the extent to which male colleagues understood or recognized the barriers academic women face in the profession. This finding resonates with research in relation to progress and resistance in gender equality work, which indicates a denial that inequality exists is a serious challenge to organisational cultural progression (Lee-Gosselin, Briere and Hawo, 2013). White and O'Connor's (2017) analysis of gendered success in higher education pinpoints the centrality of gender to the values and interests of its stakeholders as a key element of a gendered change model.

Although interviewees expressed frustration at a lack of action, they rejected affirmative or positive action in relation to the recruitment and promotion of women academics. Their objections mirrored those discussed in Manfredi's work on positive action and increasing gender diversity in senior roles in higher education (Manfredi, 2017). One objection was that they wanted women to be appointed because of their merit and not because of affirmative action. This objection may well be linked to their conceptualization of positive action as involving women being given an *automatic* preference simply because of their gender, rather than an understanding of positive action as a 'tie-breaking' process. For example, if a woman and a man are as 'qualified as each other', preference would be given to the candidate from the underrepresented group. The second objection was that affirmative action undermines the concept of a meritocracy and that decisions have to be made in favour of the 'best' candidate. The concept of a meritocracy, however, is a dangerous discourse (Aiston, 2015); 'the danger lies in making the jump from stating that a system should be a meritocracy to believing it is one' (Aiston, 2011, p.281). Accepting that policies and processes designed to be meritocratic and fair may not be applied equitably is key. Moreover, 'merit' is not value neutral but a product of masculine norms (Manfredi, 2017).

1 The SDO and FSDO potentially frame or influence the policy approaches
2 universities in Hong Kong might take to address the underrepresentation of women in
3 senior roles. As Fitzgerald and Wilkinson comment university policies ‘cannot be
4 understood without reference to the interrelationship between the broader legislative
5 and policy context in which they are nested’ (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010, p. 94;
6 see also White and O’Connor, 2017). Interviewees’ commented on this issue and also
7 that, in their opinion, their institutions were at the early stages of supporting academic
8 women. It would appear that from a policy response perspective, both at the societal
9 and university level, the approach is one of *equal treatment*. In a typology of policy
10 approaches to gender equality, equal treatment is considered the first stage.
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13 Both the documentary analysis and interviews indicated organizational
14 commitments to a work-family narrative to explain the underrepresentation of women
15 as academic leaders. Padavic et.al’s (2019) research suggests that this ‘hegemonic’
16 narrative is not contested, even in the face of countervailing evidence, and functions
17 as a social defense. Social defense is defined as collective arrangements, for example,
18 a prevalent discourse, created or used by an organisation’s members as a protection
19 against ‘disturbing’ effects. They argue that a theory of social defense in relation to
20 women’s professional careers may not be that ‘farfetched’; ‘consciously well-
21 intended initiatives may be less about reducing inequality and more about fending off
22 the disturbing emotions it raises while allowing it to persist’ (Padavic, Ely and Reid,
23 2019, p. 40). Family responsibilities as the primary explanation for women’s
24 inequality can also be seen as conveniently locating the problem outside of the
25 organisation, thereby limiting the kinds of actions that are seen as necessary and
26 legitimising hegemonic masculinist structures (White and O’Connor, 2017).
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32 Conclusion

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34 The aim of this research was to get an insight into how, and to what extent, three-case
35 study universities in Hong Kong are supporting the career progression of women
36 academics and their attainment of senior leadership roles. Our research has provided a
37 window into the tensions women academics’ experience in living with and *within*
38 policy contexts. We asked ‘What is the “policy” response to the underrepresentation
39 of women as academic leaders in Hong Kong?’ Our research indicates that the
40 response at this point is limited, and at an early stage within the case-study
41 universities. Looking back at our definition of ‘policy’, first as an attempt to solve a
42 problem, it is dubious that the problem is fully understood. As Bacchi (Bacchi, 1999,
43 quoted in Lombardo, et. al., 2017) argues policies assume particular interpretations of
44 what the problem at stake is. In this context, the emphasis is placed on family
45 responsibilities as the ‘problem’. Referring back to definition of policy, if policy is as
46 an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate
47 action, we can see that our research indicates a lack of buy-in from middle
48 management and some male colleagues. This lack of understanding, and consequently
49 commitment to ‘solving’ the underrepresentation of women in the most senior roles in
50 the profession, means the ‘enactment’ of policy will be challenging, despite the best
51 efforts of university leaders. In addition, there are aspects of this particular context
52 which make it challenging to bring about meaningful cultural change; the focus on
53 equal opportunity, or *equal treatment*, along with a strong belief in the concept of a
54 meritocracy, means that gender has not been ‘undone’ but rather accommodated. As
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Fitzgerald and Wilkinson argue, policies that attempt to address inequality are primarily concerned with disadvantage, rather than addressing how privilege operates and how one group can exercise advantage over the other: 'the emphasis...is on lifting the barrier, not its removal' (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010, p. 30). Embracing a perception of universities as gendered organisations ultimately entails a fundamental paradigm shift (White and O'Connor, 2017).

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Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership: the case of Hong Kong

Keywords: Women academics, leadership, equality, policy

Abstract

The absence of women academics in the most senior ranks and leadership roles in higher education is both an international phenomenon and an enduring social justice issue. This article provides an original insight into the ‘policy’ response to the underrepresentation of women academics as senior leaders in three case-study universities in Hong Kong. Based on documentary analysis and interviews with 35 women academics, the research indicates: ‘gaps’ between institutions voicing a commitment to gender equality and actual practice; middle management being a ‘sticking point’ in bringing about cultural change; a lack of understanding by some male colleagues of the barriers women face in the profession; a rejection of positive or affirmative action by interviewees; and a policy context that is focused upon equal treatment.

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women academics in the most senior ranks and leadership roles in higher education is both an international phenomenon and an enduring social justice issue. But our knowledge of the challenges and barriers women face in progressing within the profession has advanced significantly in recent decades.

Research indicates that selection processes within the academy remain highly gendered, thereby limiting academic women’s career advancement (Husu, 2004; van den Brink et. al., 2010). Academic women find difficulties in accessing elite male networks (Tessens, White and Web, 2011). However, such networks are critical to career advancement, particularly when recruitment and selection processes are not always transparent (Riordan, 2011).

Gender stereotyping impacts on the work women are seen as best placed to undertake (Morley, 2007; Schein, 2007; Turner, 2002) and this work keeps women in the ‘ivory’ basement, with minimal reward or recognition (Fitzgerald, 2014). Women particularly face challenges in the research prestige economy of higher education. Women publish less, probably as a consequence of gendered academic workloads (Author; Tower, et. al., 2007), are less likely to be on the editorial boards of major journals (Kennedy, Lin and Dickstein, 2001), and suffer from gender bias in the evaluation of research excellence (Monroe et. al., 2008).

The academy is positioned as a ‘carefree workplace’ (Morley, 2013). The ideal academic is depicted as the dedicated individual (Deem, 2003; Jacobs, 2008). Women academics, therefore, particularly face challenges negotiating professional and domestic life (Probert, 2005).

The ‘think leader, think male’ attitude privileges masculine values, thereby

making it difficult for academic women to negotiate their identities as female leaders (Acker, 2012; Biling, 2011). Women who exhibit privileged ‘masculine’ traits, such as ambition or assertiveness, are seen as difficult or ‘unfeminine’ (Author, 2015b). There is evidence to suggest that in highly masculine organizational cultures women are rejecting leadership roles (Morley and Crossouard, 2016).

But what is being done? Addressing gender inequality in academia and enabling academic women to progress is a key responsibility of universities (Bagilhole, 2000). Policy responses, acknowledging that there is a problem regarding gender equality in higher education, are evident in Europe and the United States (Sagaria, 2007; Caprile et al. 2012).

The aim of this article is to gain an insight into the ‘policy’ response to the absence of women academics as senior leaders in Hong Kong. It asks: how, and to what extent, are universities in Hong Kong supporting the career progression of women academics and their attainment of senior leadership roles? Research has shown that women are woefully underrepresented in the most senior leadership roles in the Hong Kong sector (Author, 2017a). They publish less, receive less external funding, spend more time on teaching than their male colleagues, and are less likely to be on the tenure track (Author, 2014). This research is positioned theoretically as part of a broader challenge to the norm of using Western experience as the referent for all experience (Mohanty, 1988).

The Hong Kong Context

Hong Kong currently has eight institutions publicly funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Relative to its size, this is an incredibly strong sector in terms of world rankings at both institutional and disciplinary levels. For example, four out of the eight universities are ranked in the QS World University Rankings’ top 50 (2018). The sector is associated with quality.

The gender equality legal requirements in Hong Kong result from by two ordinances. The 1995 Sexual Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) protects against discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, pregnancy, or marital status. Per the SDO (Section 48), employers may take positive actions to ensure equal opportunities for persons of a particular sex or marital status, or who are pregnant. The 1997 Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FDSO) protects against discrimination based on family status, ensuring employees who must care for their children or elderly parents are not disadvantaged (EOC, c.2009). In addition, the government encourages employers to adopt family-friendly practices, such as paternal leave and flexible work arrangements (Siu & Phillips, 2006).

Theoretical Framing

Policy is defined in the broadest sense herein, and is seen as both ‘an attempt to solve problems and an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action’ (Ward et. al., 2015). The theoretical framing for this research is policy implementation dynamics (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). This includes an analysis of the ‘enactment stage’, concerning how policy is turned into action (Schofield,

2004), an exploration of any ambiguity and conflict inherent in the policy arena (Martland, 1995), and a study of the role of actors in implementation processes and change agency (Callerstig, 2014).

Contrasted policy approaches are as follows: equal treatment, positive action, and mainstreaming gender equality. Equal treatment sets out a legal framework that ensures the equal treatment of men and women. Rees (2007) argues that in equal treatment practices in higher education women are not treated *equally*, but are treated the *same* as men; ‘in effect, crudely put, women can succeed in academic life provided they behave like men’ (p. 15). **In equality of treatment approaches women’s difference – to men – is constructed as a disadvantage that requires remedial action, with women located as a ‘policy problem’ (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010).** Positive action measures are based on the acknowledgement that there are differences between men and women. The intention is to create a level-playing field, but Rees cautions that such actions are mechanisms, again, to make women more like men. **Values and work practices remain both unchanged and unchallenged (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010).** Finally, mainstreaming gender equality can be described as ‘the promotion of gender equality through its systematic integration into all systems and structures, into all policies, processes, and procedures, into the organization and its culture, into ways of seeing and doing’ (Rees, 2007, p. 16).

Method

Three out of the eight UGC universities in Hong Kong were chosen as case studies: University of Hong Kong (HKU), Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). These three universities have been traditionally regarded as Hong Kong’s ‘research-intensive’ institutions and are classified as world leading in international league tables. The rationale for focusing on these three universities was a working assumption that in highly competitive research intensive environments, academic women might well face even greater barriers to their career progression. Table 1 shows data on academics’ rank and gender across the faculties of Science, Business, Engineering and Arts and Social Sciences at the case study universities (Author, 2017a). Data at this level of detail is not publicly available in Hong Kong.

Table 1: Case-study institutions by academic rank and gender (Author, 2017a)

Institution	Rank Gender	Professor	Associate professor	Assistant Professor	Lecturers & Instructors
Hong Kong University	Women	25 (13.4%)	35 (18.1%)	73 (36.5%)	104 (53.9%)
	Men	161 (86.6%)	158 (81.9%)	127 (63.5%)	89 (46.1%)
HKUST	Women	16 (6.9%)	20 (15.7%)	31 (25.4%)	62 (52.1%)
	Men	215 (93.1%)	107 (84.3%)	91 (74.6%)	57 (47.9%)
CUHK	Women	32 (12.1%)	46 (25.3%)	55 (31.3%)	76 (42.2%)
	Men	233 (87.9%)	136 (74.7%)	121 (68.7%)	104 (57.8%)

The first stage of the research was a documentary analysis of the policies, initiatives and strategies that had been put in place to support women academics in Hong Kong in the case-study institutions. Documents can ‘tell us about the aspirations and intentions of the period to which they belong’ (May, 2001, p. 176). The aim was to get an indication of the aspirational and formal commitments of the institutions to gender equality, and to consider the extent to which the career progression of women academics and their achievement of senior leadership roles was regarded as a university priority. Each university website was analysed, along with any corresponding documents, to provide an insight into the visible, public indications of the institution’s commitment to equality.

The second stage of the research comprised semi-structured interviews with women academics from the case study institutions. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their understanding of any particular strategies, policies or initiatives in their own institution, and if they regarded them as beneficial/effective. They were asked to consider to what extent they saw their own institution as committed to, and being proactive in, promoting and supporting women into senior academic roles. The intention was to understand their perception of their institution’s approach to supporting academic women. In placing women’s testimony as central, we are embracing the approach taken by scholars in politics and development studies who argue that repoliticising gender entails creating space for marginalised groups to express their voices in order to further gender equality goals (Lomardo, Meier and Verloo, 2017). The lead author has previously interviewed senior male leaders in the sector, including the three Vice-Chancellors/Presidents of the case-study universities.

The sample was stratified by two key variables: academic rank and discipline. 35 interviews were conducted, involving 13 (17% of) academic women employed in science and engineering and 22 (22% of) women working in social sciences and humanities. For the purposes of anonymity the universities will be referred to as UA, UB, and UC when interviewees are quoted.

The analysis adopted a three-stage coding approach (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). First, basic coding was carried out. Second, attention was given to the content of what was said, to generate themes to reflect the language interviewees used. Third, abstraction from what the interviewees had said took place to aid the creation of broad analytic themes.

Case-study University Profiles of Gender Equality Promotion

CUHK had established a task force on women and family friendly policies, with the aim ‘to promote a working environment that is responsive to the needs of women and colleagues with family responsibilities’ (CUHK, 2016b). The University had put in place ‘gender sensitive’ and ‘family-friendly’ policies and practices, including improving on-campus family-friendly facilities, flexible work arrangements and maternity and paternity leave. The target beneficiaries were primarily women with family responsibilities, reflecting an underlying assumption that family is a key

barrier to women academics' career progression. A committee against sexual harassment had also been established. The University's mission statement did not refer to a commitment to gender equality. However, the President's blog signaled an awareness of the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. The President focused on family as a significant barrier to career progression, but acknowledged that the issue is complicated and that equally qualified women may not be given the same opportunities as their male colleagues to enter leadership positions (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016a).

HKUST had identified diversity and inclusion broadly as a core institutional value (HKUST, 2016a). The University had established a gender discrimination committee and created a university policy on sexual harassment. Equal opportunity statements were evident in job advertisements, along with a commitment to diversity: 'The University is committed to increasing the diversity of its faculty and has a range of family-friendly policies in place' (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2016b). The linguistic link between diversity and 'family-friendly policies' suggests again an institutional understanding that family is key barrier to women's progression in the profession. A 'Women's Faculty Association' had also been formed with the primary aim to 'actively promote a diverse, inclusive, equitable and intellectually vibrant environment' (HKUST, 2016c). The association emphasised their role in supporting the Provost's 'initiatives related to work/ family issues, to diversity recruitment, to improve campus culture and gender diversity policy formulation.'

HKU's strategic development plan broadly signaled a commitment to diversity and equal opportunities (HKU, 2016a). Gender was not specifically referred to in the University's mission. However, equal opportunity statements were evident in job advertisements. These ranged from simple equal opportunity statements, to more inclusive versions that particularly encouraged women, members of underrepresented groups and those with disabilities (HKU, 2016b). An Equal Opportunities Unit assists the University in creating an equal opportunity environment. The primary focus of the Unit appeared to be on sexual harassment and professional conduct. The University had also become one of ten impact champions for the United Nations *HeForShe* campaign, with a commitment to 'champion a common target to treble the proportion of women' in the most senior positions of the University by 2020 (UN Women, 2016). In 2019, the number of women in first-tier leadership roles – at the level of Dean and above – has not changed. In 2016 three (16.67%) women held senior leadership roles, and this figure remains the same.

It was evident from this analysis that the 'policy response' had a focus on family, suggesting that institutions' understanding of the barriers academic women face coalesced around caring responsibilities. A women as carer discourse is willingly adopted by universities, as it fits within the prevailing hegemonic view within society of women as caregivers. Such policies signal that this issue is gaining overdue attention, and are a significant step towards equity, however, women's traditional role is reinscribed (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). This dominant explanation for women's lack of career progression, and interventions tailored to this explanation, simplifies the problem (Padavic, Ely and Reid, 2019) and offers a narrow range of 'subject locations' for women in policy terms (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). We also saw a commitment to 'equal opportunities' and dealing with sexual harassment.

HKU appeared publicly to be more active in proposing targets for increasing the number of senior women in the University. However, the analysis of publicly available data may not capture all that the universities are doing.

From talking to action, from policy to practice

The interviewees identified ‘gaps’ in relation to supporting and enabling women academics’ career trajectories. These ‘gaps’ manifested themselves in a variety of forms: for example, gaps between sentiment and actual policies, and gaps between policies and actual practice. The following quotation pinpoints the importance of translating words into policy:

[I]t’s not enough to just have the sentiment. It’s not enough to say ‘I’m really gender-sensitive and if a woman comes to me and says “I have x, y, z issues” then I will do everything possible’. That is not enough ... you need policy ... [so] a woman doesn’t have to feel like she is asking a favour. She needs to know that it is her right. (13, AssistP, UB).

Interviewees expressed frustration at a lack of action. References were made to the absence of ‘concrete implementation’ following a ‘broad campaign’ to support women academics (14, AssistP, UA), ‘sensitivities’ not in fact translating into actual policies (24, AssistP, UA) and discussions not turning into plans (32, Prof, UB). For one interviewee, their university’s position was one of ‘caring’ about the ‘gender balance’, but taking no action (2, Prof, UA), **which we might refer to institutional ‘speech acts’ (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010)**. No evidence of change at the departmental level was also raised (14, AssistP, UA). As one interviewee commented ‘I’m not sure senior management knows its audience well ... It’s not that well informed about what’s happening at the street level’ (26, Prof, UA), whilst another called on senior management to hold faculties and departments accountable for change (2, Prof, UA). In the following quotation, the interviewee is reflecting on the lack of women in her own department and the resultant issues in not having a community of women:

[T]he first thing I need is community and real community, not the department head making a nice speech once a year, saying how he supports women, or the Provost giving a nice speech every now and then. I mean that is all lip-service right? ... It doesn’t actually translate to daily, everyday support. (15, AssistP, UB)

Leading on from this point, the following quotation provides an insight into the challenges involved in and barriers to appointing more women:

I know that in recent hiring rounds, they’ve been told to try to be more diverse...but in reality when people are evaluating or discussing the candidates, people are still saying like ‘Yeah, but her work is not that interesting’.... There was one female candidate ... I thought she will be a nice addition to the division. When I talked to other colleagues they were like ‘Yeah, but her work is too traditional, it’s not interesting enough ... there are other candidates who are better’, but all those candidates are male ... (12, AssistP, UB)

O'Connor and O'Hagan's (2016) study of academic excellence highlights the subjective construction of 'excellence', involving women being seen as the problem.

Interviewees articulated cynicism as to whether change would actually come. In relation to increasing the number of women senior leaders, one interviewee commented 'they try...but do they try hard enough?' (6, AssistP, UA). Another interviewee reflected on good intentions, in the form of initiatives or a task force, taking up a lot of time, but not solving the problem (33, AssistP, UC). The following quotation raises an important point, concerning institutional drivers and tokenism:

I think the driving force is really the universities are desperate to get higher up the rankings ... It is not being driven by a real desire to have female input ... It is tokenism. (30, Prof, UC)

This point emphasises the importance of incorporating equality as a key performance indicator in quality audits, including international league tables (Morley, 2014). In addition, the ongoing monitoring and tracking of gender equality initiatives is essential to ensure sustainable change occurs (Johnson, et al., 2015).

Whilst interviewees highlighted 'gaps' in bringing about change, they also reflected on the centrality of changing mindsets; 'I guess it's important to change people's mindset, otherwise it's hard to change' (10, AssistP, UA). Male colleagues were described as not seeing or understanding the challenges academic women face and their lack of representation in senior leadership roles. One interviewee commented 'You make the men change the attitude' (20, Prof, UB), whilst another stressed it:

is about culture. It is very difficult to create like a policy or a strategy to overcome this ... They don't think there is a problem ... Our School have this Equal Opportunity Committee ... but I don't think it will create any changes. (28, AssistP, UC)

For one interviewee, it was not simply a matter of integrating policies and practices into an existing framework, but more a case of rewriting the entire *game*:

And when you ask us to play the game that has been set up by men, play by the rules of men, then obviously we're not motivated to play. It's not because we're not capable, it's because it's a stupid game right? ... So the people who have created the game in the first place have to be made aware that they have to change the game, change the rules. (15, AssistP, UB)

Feminist organisational theorists argue that a deep-rooted change to organizational culture needs to incorporate the following three aspects; the symbolic level, which signals what is important and valued in the organisation; organizational practices, that is behaviour embedded in systems and structures; and the values layer, which refers to deeply held beliefs and attitudes:

Like a mirage, they (*EEO policies*) beckon all to drink from the pool of equity, but fail to deliver at the organizational and values layers of universities, what

has been promised at the symbolic organizational level (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010, p. 138):

The data presented above, and also below, suggests the case-study universities are largely operating at a symbolic level.

Sticking points: the role of middle management

Our research highlights a further significant issue, which higher education leaders and policy makers need to consider when making recommendations and implementing policies. This issue relates to a top-down approach, and the role of middle management in making the changes happen (Mergaert, 2012). Interviewees discussed pro-active senior leaders (2 UA, 4&5 UB, and 33 UC), but questioned how this would translate further down the organizational hierarchy:

I know there's many things happening at University level, but how is it trickling down to the department itself? (9, AssistP, UA)

Interviewees indicated that middle management were a problem in relation to implementing policies and recommendations made by senior leaders. **This finding resonates with Timmers et. al's (2019) study of the efficacy of gender equality measures in the Netherlands; departments did not always comply with suggestions, or even directives, from University Boards.** A key issue was that middle managers were perceived as not understanding the challenges facing women academics:

Why do we not have more women? ... The senior leadership is very proactive, ... but all the people in the middle don't really get it, don't really understand why change is necessary or how change can be made. (13, AssistP, UB)

Interviewees discussed the challenges in implementing change in an organizational culture in which middle management did not see the need for change:

And the problem is there's a whole level below him, some get it and some don't ... And also, you know, Provosts come and Provosts go ... so unless the whole culture builds around ... I don't know how long-lasting the effects will be. (4, Prof, UB)

Moreover, this lack of understanding translated into discriminatory behaviour:

Actually a lot of these department chairs think there's no gender problem. They're in total denial. They showed up to this meeting and they make sexist comments. They laugh and giggle about the idea of like needing special support for female faculty ... absolutely disgusting some of the behaviour, they believe it's fundamentally unfair to favour female faculty over male faculty. (17, AssocP, UB)

Here standpoint theory seems to be particularly relevant. Standpoint theory posits that location in a social structure influences a person's view of the social world. As members of a privileged group, men – in this instance, male academics – have relatively little experience of discrimination or prejudice, and are therefore less likely

to be aware of structural barriers. They are less likely than women to believe gender discrimination exists (Konrad and Hartman, 2002). The latter point raised in the above quotation, namely a perception that it is unfair to 'favour' female faculty, is one to which we shall return when considering the Hong Kong context. As O'Neil et al. (2008) discuss, women will continue to face challenges in the workplace when individual attitudes and perceptions do not keep pace with organisational change. A genuine and 'lived commitment' to the values of equity and diversity, promoted through practice at a *local* level is essential for gender initiatives to succeed (Johnson, et al., 2015).

As discussed earlier in the article and supported by previous research (Callerstig, 2014), individuals are central to bringing about change, and this is particularly significant in relation to the role of head of department. Interviewees spoke of the variability of heads implementing equality. One interviewee commented that the department head sets the 'tone', further noting '...so I think it's quite decentralized, I'm not sure I could say that there's an overarching culture (*of gender sensitivity*)' (32, Prof, UB). Another interviewee provided a specific example of this variability:

You know women are supposed to get teaching relief [as a result of their maternity leave] ... Some department chairs don't give relief, they give deferral ... ultimately it's up to the department chairs to enforce them (17, AssocP, UB)

Thus our research demonstrates a 'mismatch' between the aspirations of university policy makers and what is happening on the ground (street level implementation).

It is also clear that many members of staff, particularly middle managers, are not taking the opportunity to attend events in relation to gender equity: 'the irony is people who need that kind of training do not come' (23, AssocP, UA). Similar issues were found in Doherty and Manfredi's (2009) study; engaging managers in gender awareness workshops proved challenging, with resistance not uncommon and discussions in relation to gender and leadership in the academy seeming like a 'distant target indeed' (p.152). Research indicates, however, the importance of such learning and developmental activities, particularly in circumstances where men are more likely to discount discriminatory practices than women. Hence knowing who should be the target of such development and getting these people committed is far more important than simply facilitating such events (Davies, Healey and Cliffe, 2016). Here capacity and learning implementation instruments might be particularly helpful in providing 'resources, knowledge and skills to catalyse and coordinate the actions of individual policy actors' (Engeli and Mazur, 2018, p. 115). This view was articulated by one of our interviewees:

At some point, I think the change has to come from the one who thinks that there are no differences between men and women, and the difference should come from the men who think that there are no difference between men and women. (6, AssistP, UA)

This also suggests that appointing candidates with a greater awareness and commitment to diversity and inclusion issues is crucial. A starting point would be to include such criteria in job descriptions (Doherty and Manfredi, 2005).

Interviewees also reflected on the challenges of a 'top-down' approach. Reference was made to trying to 'convince' deans and heads of department and the need to engage/mobilise colleagues (21, Prof, UA). As one interviewee commented: '...so have a grassroots effort to make the message stronger rather than having a downward message, having a bottom-up message.' (26, Prof, UA). Here the case can be made for empowering gender-based groups to be actively engaged in the policy process (Verloo, 2005); in the case-study universities this would include: Women Studies Research Centre, HKU; Gender Research Centre, CUHK; and Women's Faculty Association, HKUST.

Lowering standards? Affirmative action and meritocracies

When considering how to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles, a number of interviewees expressed unease at providing targeted support for women, particularly in relation to affirmative action or positive action. As one interviewee commented 'the affirmative action thing is very controversial' (12, AssistP, UB). This finding is contrary to previous research in which women academics' viewed targeted support as desirable (Doherty and Manfredi, 2009). Concerns were raised around women's career progression being seen by others as a consequence of their sex: 'Oh she got promoted because she is a woman' (20, Prof, UB); 'other people say it (*affirmative action*) is unfair' (7, AssistP, UC). For one interviewee treating women 'differently' would encourage people to think of women *as* different and for her this was problematic; 'It's not serving them ... anybody who is hired should be hired on merit' (9, AssistP, UA). This comment resonates with Molla's and Cuthbert's (2014) point that prejudicial attitudes towards women are such that affirmative action policies are considered to be a confirmation of the inferiority of women. Proactively looking for senior women was seen as a lowering of standards (32, Prof, UB) and this was in direct opposition to an understanding of career progression as a result of a meritocratic system:

And then when hiring, we definitely look for the best person, so if a man turns out to be much better, better than a female, then we don't have this policy of giving the female a priority. (8, AssocP, UC)

There was a strong sense that 'everything must be on merit'. Affirmative action was seen as neither realistic nor in the best interests of an institution (26, Prof, UA), presumably since this would be perceived as a lowering of standards. The following quotation exemplifies a belief in a meritocratic system:

In the United States, they have this kind of disclaimer ... all openings, they welcome actually female, non-white ... you know to apply. I don't think that is necessary, but just that everyone should be sort of measured and evaluated by an open system. (24, AssistP, UA).

Interestingly, interviewee 8 began to question the presence of a meritocracy when asked further about staff being hired/promoted on merit,:

It's also the kind of culture that when people look at two candidates, a man and a woman, they don't do it intentionally, but maybe they subconsciously think the man is more suitable for this kind of role ... not only the Chinese culture, across the world. (8, AssocP, UC)

Despite this, the interviewee continued to revert back to concerns that quotas would force the university to hire or promote unqualified (or poorly qualified) individuals. Ambiguity was evident throughout this interviewee's thinking on this issue; 'I have very mixed feelings about having some special support for females'.

However, the relation between a belief in a meritocratic system and the system actually being meritocratic was questioned by other interviewees:

The dean said 'But we need to hire the best people', without seeming to be aware at all of the libraries of research that show this concept of hiring the best person is heavily weighed by who is doing the hiring ... They are so blinded that they don't realize they have to take extra careful precautions and measures in the hiring practices. (29, Prof, UA)

Brink and Benschop (2012) discuss biased decision-making in academic appointments as of the one of the heads of the 'seven-headed dragon' of gender inequality in the academy. The role of full Professor is constructed as too much for women as carers, leadership is equated with masculinity and women's qualities are systematically undervalued. The existence of 'transparent' and 'accountability' policies do not negate, but rather veil inequality practices; e.g. preferred male candidates are already selected. Brink and Benschop call for organizational reflection upon recruitment and selection processes, including gender awareness training for committee members, which is implemented in actual practice; 'attention should thus go to the incorporation of gender awareness into the messy realities of actual professional appointments' (Brink and Benschop, 2012, p.87).

Family-friendly policies?

The interviewees largely identified university support, when it occurred, as focusing on family-related concerns. This support was seen as somewhat problematic. For example, the following interviewee expressed anxiety as to how her department views her pregnancy, and in particular if she will extend her tenure clock:

I need to be a little bit concerned about when and whether I need to extend my tenure clock, and how my department thinks about my pregnancy ... Personally I feel sometimes a little bit uncomfortable. (10, AssistP, UA)

Relatedly, and potentially providing a rationale for the above interviewee's anxiety, another interviewee commented:

If they give you an extra year on the tenure clock when they evaluate you, how do they relax their standard in a way that is fair to you without making it feel like 'Oh, we're just giving her tenure because she is a woman'? So I think

the profession struggles with that sort of thing and women don't feel comfortable. (13, AssistP, UB)

This level of unease, relating to how academic women who take career breaks are viewed, is consistent with previous research (Pribbenow, 2010); for example, breaks are misinterpreted as a woman's lack of devotion to their career, and particularly their research (Dever and Morrison, 2009). Also maternity leave and tenure clock extension have been seen as failing to take into account gendered family dynamics (Loumansky, Goodman and Jackson, 2007):

I would say if Mummy get one year, Daddy should just have half a year. Or Daddy has one year, Mummy should have two years. It's definitely totally different levels of input. (3, AssocP, UC)

Interviewee 10 explained the consequences of her maternity leave; rather worryingly she referred to having to 'make-up' the teaching she will be unable to do. Similarly, a colleague in a different University also made reference to female faculty having to make up all their teaching when returning from maternity leave. This interviewee went on to note that she believed that the University had changed this policy, but comments:

I think those are not really successes ... It just corrected a wrong ... I mean when a man had cancer and then took one year of leave and when the man came back, they didn't have to double their teaching! (20, Prof, UB)

In this context maternity leave had been a double-edged sword, described as a research 'penalty'; 'if you have to catch up on all your teaching, you don't have time to do your research, right?' (4, Prof, UB)

Interviewees also pointed out the limited focus on 'family-friendly' policies (15, UB; 30, UC; 22, UA). The emphasis on 'family friendly' policies from a policy outcome perspective can be seen as accommodating or compensating for traditional gender relations, instead of transforming them; organizational support is provided for accommodating the female role of primary caregiver with economic independence (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). 'Think women's issues, think family-friendly initiatives' fails to respond to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the barriers academic women face in the academy, as evidenced by previous research and women themselves in Hong Kong (Author, 2017b). The focus on caring responsibilities as the primary explanatory factor for women's lack of progression in the academy is taking attention away from structural and systemic discriminatory practices *within* the profession (Author, 2015a). The dominant 'work-family' narrative leads to policy responses focused on work-family accommodations. Evidence suggests, however, that such policy responses have done little to advance women's careers and paradoxically have 'often hurt them by offering off-ramps that stigmatize users and derail their careers' (Padavic, Ely and Reid, 2019).

The Situation in Hong Kong

Our research indicates that from the interviewees' perspective all three institutions are at the early stages of promoting/supporting academic women's career advancement.

References were made to a ‘kind of awareness’ (7, AssistP, UC), a ‘realisation’ (9, AssistP, UA), and to institutions starting to face the issue. This growing awareness was viewed positively, but was not interpreted as institutions being especially proactive at this stage.

There was a sense that there is a long way to go (34, AssistP, UC) and a hope that an infrastructure would follow ‘sooner rather than later, because the more we wait, the more we are actually wasting a generation of women who could have been leaders’ (2, Prof, UA).

This next quotation leads us to another issue, namely providing support to marginalised groups *in order* to bring about equity:

It’s not basically really distinguishing a person based on the gender, so in one sense you don’t really discriminate [against] women, but in the other sense you’re also not giving them [women] any extra ... (7, AssistP, UC)

For a number of interviewees in one institution, this point was particularly relevant to the Hong Kong context, and in relation to the SDO. The ordinance seems to have been interpreted as a legal barrier to creating a level-playing field for women, including any action that is seen to particularly support one group over another, as the following quotation illustrates:

...she and I pitch to the provost [a leadership programme for women] and he said in Hong Kong, we can’t have any kind of programmes that are specially targeting one group or another. It’s illegal ... It’s affirmative action or something right? (17, AssocP, UB)

This interviewee goes on to comment:

I think we need policies that favour certain groups over others in order to create the level playing field.

Similarly, another interviewee noted:

In Hong Kong if we do anything everybody will say ‘Oh that’s against the discrimination ordinance’ ... which is ridiculous because there is discrimination built into the system (4, Prof, UB)

However, the SDO does permit positive action, whereby an act targeting persons of a particular sex is reasonably intended to ensure that those persons have equal opportunities.

Discussion

The documentary analysis of the policies, initiatives and strategies of the three-case study universities indicated that the underrepresentation of women academics as senior leaders was not publicly flagged as part of the institutions’ mission statements or strategic development. **The centrality of gender to the purpose of the organisation was absent (White and O’Connor, 2017).** Interviewees, however, highlighted a

number of significant issues in relation to supporting the career advancement of women academics, suggesting a need for organisational cultural change. Modifications of an institution's mission or a repriorisation of institutional goals is seen as an important aspect of organisational cultural change in higher education (Baughan, 2012; Coman and Bonciu, 2016).

The interviewees identified 'gaps' between institutions voicing a commitment to gender equality and actual practice. In relation to implementation dynamics this represents an issue at the 'enactment stage' (Schofield, 2004). This finding resonates with previous research (Monroe et. al., 2008; Timmers et. al., 2019; Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). The interviewees pinpointed middle management as a potential 'sticking point' in bringing about cultural change. Here the concept of policy 'enactment' is particularly helpful in theorizing this point; enactment refers to an understanding that policies are interpreted and 'translated' by diverse actors rather than simply implemented. Enactment is dependent on whether a policy is mandated, recommended or suggested and '...putting policies into practice is a creative, sophisticated and complex process that is always also located in a particular context and place' (Braun, Maguire and Ball, p. 549). Middle management is routinely observed as the crucial interface between policy and implementation in most large organisations (Moodie, 2002). Whilst most policies are decided at university level, the cooperation of departments is urgently needed (Timmers et. al., 2019).

The interviewees questioned the extent to which male colleagues understood or recognized the barriers academic women face in the profession. This finding resonates with research in relation to progress and resistance in gender equality work, which indicates a denial that inequality exists is a serious challenge to organisational cultural progression (Lee-Gosselin, Briere and Hawo, 2013). White and O'Connor's (2017) analysis of gendered success in higher education pinpoints the centrality of gender to the values and interests of its stakeholders as a key element of a gendered change model.

Although interviewees expressed frustration at a lack of action, they rejected affirmative or positive action in relation to the recruitment and promotion of women academics. Their objections mirrored those discussed in Manfredi's work on positive action and increasing gender diversity in senior roles in higher education (Manfredi, 2017). One objection was that they wanted women to be appointed because of their merit and not because of affirmative action. This objection may well be linked to their conceptualization of positive action as involving women being given an *automatic* preference simply because of their gender, rather than an understanding of positive action as a 'tie-breaking' process. For example, if a woman and a man are as 'qualified as each other', preference would be given to the candidate from the underrepresented group. The second objection was that affirmative action undermines the concept of a meritocracy and that decisions have to be made in favour of the 'best' candidate. The concept of a meritocracy, however, is a dangerous discourse (Author, 2015); 'the danger lies in making the jump from stating that a system should be a meritocracy to believing it is one' (Author, 2011, p.281). Accepting that policies and processes designed to be meritocratic and fair may not be applied equitably is key. Moreover, 'merit' is not value neutral but a product of masculine norms (Manfredi, 2017).

The SDO and FSDO potentially frame or influence the policy approaches universities in Hong Kong might take to address the underrepresentation of women in senior roles. As Fitzgerald and Wilkinson comment university policies ‘cannot be understood without reference to the interrelationship between the broader legislative and policy context in which they are nested’ (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010, p. 94; see also White and O’Connor, 2017). Interviewees’ commented on this issue and also that, in their opinion, their institutions were at the early stages of supporting academic women. It would appear that from a policy response perspective, both at the societal and university level, the approach is one of *equal treatment*. In a typology of policy approaches to gender equality, equal treatment is considered the first stage.

Both the documentary analysis and interviews indicated organizational commitments to a work-family narrative to explain the underrepresentation of women as academic leaders. Padavic et.al’s (2019) research suggests that this ‘hegemonic’ narrative is not contested, even in the face of countervailing evidence, and functions as a social defense. Social defense is defined as collective arrangements, for example, a prevalent discourse, created or used by an organisation’s members as a protection against ‘disturbing’ effects. They argue that a theory of social defense in relation to women’s professional careers may not be that ‘farfetched’; ‘consciously well-intended initiatives may be less about reducing inequality and more about fending off the disturbing emotions it raises while allowing it to persist’ (Padavic, Ely and Reid, 2019, p. 40). Family responsibilities as the primary explanation for women’s inequality can also be seen as conveniently locating the problem outside of the organisation, thereby limiting the kinds of actions that are seen as necessary and legitimising hegemonic masculinist structures (White and O’Connor, 2017).

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to get an insight into how, and to what extent, three-case study universities in Hong Kong are supporting the career progression of women academics and their attainment of senior leadership roles. Our research has provided a window into the tensions women academics’ experience in living with and *within* policy contexts. We asked ‘What is the “policy” response to the underrepresentation of women as academic leaders in Hong Kong?’ Our research indicates that the response at this point is limited, and at an early stage within the case-study universities. Looking back at our definition of ‘policy’, first as an attempt to solve a problem, it is dubious that the problem is fully understood. As Bacchi (Bacchi, 1999, quoted in Lombardo, et. al., 2017) argues policies assume particular interpretations of what the problem at stake is. In this context, the emphasis is placed on family responsibilities as the ‘problem’. Referring back to definition of policy, if policy is as an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action, we can see that our research indicates a lack of buy-in from middle management and some male colleagues. This lack of understanding, and consequently commitment to ‘solving’ the underrepresentation of women in the most senior roles in the profession, means the ‘enactment’ of policy will be challenging, despite the best efforts of university leaders. In addition, there are aspects of this particular context which make it challenging to bring about meaningful cultural change; the focus on equal opportunity, or *equal treatment*, along with a strong belief in the concept of a meritocracy, means that gender has not been ‘undone’ but rather accommodated. As

Fitzgerald and Wilkinson argue, policies that attempt to address inequality are primarily concerned with disadvantage, rather than addressing how privilege operates and how one group can exercise advantage over the other: 'the emphasis...is on lifting the barrier, not its removal' (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010, p. 30). Embracing a perception of universities as gendered organisations ultimately entails a fundamental paradigm shift (White and O'Connor, 2017).

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