

**MIND THE GAP: UCL GENDER EQUALITY
EVENT, UCL INSTITUTE OF CHILD HEALTH,
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By Rachael Dobson

The Gender Equality Event hosted by UCL invited us to spend a day reflecting on the current status of women in academia: the obstacles that women still face in academia, changes that have taken effect over the past decades, and the initiatives that will shape the future.

Speakers were invited to discuss gender inequality in science, engineering and technology (SET), research areas where women are under-represented, but disciplines in which women nevertheless represent a growing proportion of the workforce. The Royal Society of Chemistry, the Institute of Physics, The Athena Project and the Medical Schools Council presented us with their research, from which they have begun to identify difficulties affecting women in SET. We also heard first-hand accounts from extremely successful academics – Dame Hazel Genn, Fellow of the UCL Faculty of Laws; Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty; Professor Stephen Whittle, founder of Press for Change; and Dr Maggie Aderin, space scientist at Astrium Ltd – who were invited to share their career histories and offer their insight on how to succeed in the academic environment.

The scale of gender inequality can be assessed by the proportion of women in senior positions relative to their male colleagues, as well as by the gap in the average wages of men and women in equivalent positions. By both of these measures, women face gender inequality in all professions, and at all stages of their career.

What can the statistics tell us? Several recent reports have highlighted some surprising data on the subject. The average gender pay gap between men and women working in the UK is 17% (TUC, 2008) and this increases to 26% at the level of director, and further still in the financial sector (IoD, 2006). The gender pay gap between men and women in their 20s in the same job is only 3%, but this gap increases to 23% for those in their 40s, and does not recover in later years. Further, the pay gap between women working part-time and men working full-time is 36%, per hour worked. This comparison is important because 40% of women, and half of working mothers, work part-time (ONS, 2002). Adding to this pay gap, the majority of women cluster in low-paid jobs such as teaching, caring, cleaning and secretarial positions (ONS, 2002). Even within these low-paid occupations, the gender

pay gap exists between men and women in the same job.

In the UK, women bear the majority of childcare responsibilities. Returning from a maternity leave, over a third of female professionals in the UK downgrade to low-paid jobs requiring less than A-level qualifications, often part-time (Gregory, 2008). Women in general fail to achieve senior management positions in their careers, and are under-represented at this level (ONS, 2002). There is no evidence that men with children face a similar ‘fatherhood penalty’ compared to their childless male counterparts. Overall, these statistics show that in real terms, women earn much less than men, due to lower-paid jobs, part-time work, family commitments and the gender pay gap.

We learned at the gender equality event that the figures are similar for women in academia, where recruitment and retention of female talent remains a problem. There is no difference in ability or intelligence between men and women in the sciences. While girls perform equally well or better than boys in science subjects from GCSE to undergraduate level, the proportion of women in SET subjects – chemistry, biology, physics, mathematics and engineering – steadily declines from undergraduate through to professor, where fewer than 10% of professors are women (EC, 2006). Even fewer sit on management committees or hold senior positions, such as dean or provost, within universities. The number of senior women academics has, however, rapidly increased over the past five decades, suggesting that differences in genetic ability or aptitude cannot account for the scarcity of women at the top levels of their profession (Handelsman, 2007).

The data vary between SET subjects, with physics and engineering being particularly imbalanced from as early as A-level onwards: only 20% of physics A-level students and 4% of professors are female (ATHENA Project, 2004). Conversely, in the biological and medical sciences women are now over-represented at the undergraduate level. Anita Holdcroft of the Medical Schools Council reported that while more than 60% of medical students are women, only 25% of consultants and less than 10% of clinical academic professors are women (DH, 2007). This implies that women are facing barriers to success, as there is clearly no ‘supply’ problem in medicine. Many women leave careers in science after the postdoctoral stage, and very few who pursue it become professors.

Peter Main presented a report commissioned by the Institute of Physics. Through analysis of employment data, site visits and surveys of university physics departments, the report

indicated that both men and women are concerned with working hours, flexibility, pay and career structure, though women rank these concerns higher than men. Short-term contracts and uncertainty over job security are also a greater deterrent for women (IOP, 2006).

Women have also expressed that they don't view pursuing an academic career as being compatible with their family and childcare responsibilities. Women academics are more likely than men to avoid marriage or having children (Drago, 2006). Competition for permanent tenure positions often occurs at the same stage in one's career as having children, a conflict that disproportionately affects women. Returning to academia after maternity leave is viewed as almost 'impossible'. Women with children publish fewer papers and are awarded fewer grants (MSC, 2007). This is not unexpected, as they have less time than the men they are in competition with to dedicate to research, attending conferences and applying for grants. In an academic culture that celebrates long working hours as an indicator of productivity, career breaks and childcare commitments have negative consequences on career progression. Peter Main noted that within the physics departments surveyed, paternity leave was often viewed as 'holiday', and most fathers did not participate in these schemes.

Institutional discrimination is still an important - if often intangible - factor in gender inequality in academia. A report commissioned by the Royal Society of Chemistry, and presented at the conference by Caroline Fox and Sarah Dickinson, found that the lack of formal procedures for career progression, in terms of appraisal and promotion processes, disadvantages women more than men (RSC, 2004). Though women report to have similar career ambitions as their male colleagues, they are less likely to apply for, and be awarded, promotions. Networking is still an important route to promotion in academia, and this often occurs outside of working hours and away from the workplace. For women with children, the opportunities for networking are limited.

In medical academia, few women specialise in traditionally male, work-intensive career choices such as surgery, anaesthesia and cardiology, despite a large proportion of women in medical schools intending to pursue these career paths (MSC, 2007). Women who do pursue these disciplines feel they must adopt the associated 'masculine' stereotypes to succeed. Yet personal qualities perceived as making a good leader in men, such as drive and aggression, are seen as disagreeable in women, with consequences on salary and career progression (Brescoll, 2008). Women are less confident, undervalue their own competence and skills compared to their male

colleagues, and feel they have few female mentors in senior academic posts to approach for career guidance.

What can we do to change these trends, and do we agree that they need changing? Women represent an increasing proportion of staff in universities, and logic might tell us that the current gender imbalance will remedy itself in time. We learned from the Medical Schools Council data that this is not necessarily inevitable. Sarah Dickinson of the Royal Society of Chemistry calculated projections for gender parity at the professorial level: while equality can be expected in 2015 in the biological sciences, we will be well into the 23rd century before we see the same in mathematics departments. By ignoring the problem we are losing talent and productivity in academia.

With respect to family and work life, should women be able to 'have their cake and eat it too'? Clearly, many women choose and want to spend more of their time with family, but must this be at the expense of a rewarding career? Men in senior management and professorial positions regularly achieve both, as many of us pointed out. While it may not be feasible or desirable for women to represent 50% of all professors, there is still much progress to be made in eliminating gender bias and discrimination in universities, and creating a work environment that is open, stimulating, and supportive. In fact, such departments are also more productive in their research output (Selby, 2006).

UCL Pro-Provost Professor Janette Atkinson, and Julie Ashdown from the Equality Change Unit, introduced us to the ATHENA SWAN Charter, which outlines good practice guidelines in university departments. Recommendations for improving gender equality have also come from the JUNO code of practice published by the Institute of Physics (IOP, 2007), and the Royal Society of Chemistry Good Practice Guidelines (RSC, 2004), both presented at the UCL Gender Equality Event. All note that the guidelines proposed will benefit male researchers as much as women, and should be simple and effective to implement in any university. Key recommendations include establishing transparent and formal procedures for appointment and promotion of staff; supporting women returning from career breaks; and improving professional development through mentoring and appraisal. The JUNO guidelines recognized that "childcare is a universal feature of human life and not a 'problem' associated with women", and recommended encouraging male participation in childcare. Departments have also been reminded that welcoming job applications from women and minorities is not 'positive discrimination', and should be encouraged.

As a young woman both embarking on a career in academia and about to start a family, I attended the UCL gender equality event out of curiosity, looking for inspiration and, primarily, career advice. I left the event not entirely optimistic about my future, and astonished by some of the dismal statistics presented. While guidelines and codes of practice can be useful tools for universities, for many women succeeding in academia and balancing a family life remains an individual pursuit and a challenge.

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