

# Research Report: Hidden Costs of Being a Female Academic

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## 1. Background

The school of Psychology has been involved in the Athena SWAN scheme supported by the Queen's Gender Initiative in order to address gender imbalances and develop specific strategies to advance female staff and students in their careers. In July 2010 the school was awarded a Silver Award in recognition of its good practices developed to support the advancement of women in SET (Science, Education and Technology) in higher education. For the 2010 departmental application, the SWAN self-Assessment team has developed an action plan<sup>1</sup> that sets out a series of gender sensitive initiatives. These include, but are not limited to, the recruitment, promotion and career development of staff; the allocation of workload; the timing of meetings and outreach activities, the mentoring of female students; the support for new employees and existing members of staff at key transition points. Efforts have also been made to ensure that the broader culture of the school, including the scheduling of social gatherings and academic events, is inclusive and family-friendly. At the same time, the submission document included plans for undertaking further research on the hidden costs of being a female academic, focusing particularly on gender differences in the amount of time dedicated to student contact and pastoral care and more broadly on the impact of gender in shaping the careers of female academics and PhD students within the School.

## 2. Aims and objectives

Drawing on the School's commitment to the principles of the Athena SWAN Charter, this study aims to further investigate the experiences of female academics within the department and assess the relevance of gender in relation to the nature and progress of their career, the involvement in the academic community and the strategies employed to meet the requirements of academic life.

The rationale for carrying out this research project lies in the well documented findings in the literature highlighting that women employed in higher education often face a series of hidden difficulties in their professional life and career progression. This is due to the fact that, despite institutional efforts to promote the role of women in academia and the commitment to a

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the Action Plan were presented in the application submitted by the School for the Athena SWAN Silver award, available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/media/Media,286135,en.pdf>

meritocratic system, gender continues to play an important role in shaping career aspirations and opportunities, in determining academic workload models, and in affecting - formal and informal- involvement in academic life (Baker, 2012).

The aim of this study is to identify whether and to what extent female academics within the department experience hidden difficulties in their profession and assess the specific departmental strategies that inform the School's action plan within the Scheme.

### 3. Overview of the Literature

The literature on the subject of women and career progression in higher education is extensive. From the 1980s onward, feminist writers and researchers have produced illuminating analyses of women's disadvantaged and marginalized position in academia. This substantial body of work has contributed to highlight gendered imbalances and exclusions such as a gender pay gap, difficulties with career progression, and conflict between work/life commitments. Quantitative studies and statistics therefore provide a detailed overview about the sexual division of labour in higher education and have informed policy recommendation and interventions to re-address these gender imbalances (Kirkup, Zalevski, & Maruyama, 2010; Equality Challenge Unit, 2011).

The development of qualitative research on this topic has been useful in contextualizing statistics and quantitative research concerning the experiences of women working within academia and shedding some light on the hidden difficulties that women employed in Higher Education institutions might face in their career (Morley, 1994; Valian, 2004; Skelton, 2004; Hoskins, 2010). Research demonstrates that the often gendered experiences of career support, family circumstances and collegiality influence productivity and ambition (Baker, 2010). Evidence also suggests that, for instance, failure to gain promotion is frequently explained in terms of lack of confidence to put themselves forward and women often have had to work harder to reject the feeling that encountering obstacles in their career progression is objective evidence of their inferior abilities. This is often symptomatic of a broader tendency in the "structure vs. agency" debate to reduce major structural inequalities to the level of personal "qualities" and individual choices (Morley, 1994).

Earlier research indicates that gender shapes the kind of responsibilities and additional duties that female academics are expected to take on, pastoral care duties being a case in point (Morley, 1994). A more recent study suggests that, albeit to a lesser extent, gender differences

in the academic workload allocation remain in the area of pastoral care duties and teaching. Coupled with complex and time-consuming administrative work, these differences lead to a lack of time dedicated to research, a crucial element for professional assessment and a mechanism to gain promotion. It also indicates that the higher concentration of women in part-time and temporary contracts which often carry limitations (such as non-submission for the REF) could be problematic for women's career (Barrett & Barret, 2013, p. 13). The study concludes that even though gender differences in the workload allocation might be small their cumulative effect often produces a negative impact on women's career planning and progress (Barrett & Barret, 2013).

By and large evidence suggests that, even though gender inequality practices operate in different ways within various institutional and academic contexts, masculine norms of success and productivity persist with detrimental effect on women (Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2012). As Skelton argues, notions of the "proper academic" remain embedded within the image of male, middle-class and middle-age men which is used as a measure against which academic women (particularly young) position themselves and were positioned by (Skelton, 2004). In highlighting the more subtle ways in which female academics might experience indirect forms of discrimination, these studies are instrumental in assessing to which extent discriminatory factors influence women academics' self-concept and consciousness of their own abilities and exploring the strategies employed to avoid the negative attitudes towards them (Baker, 2010; Morley, 1994).

Different strategies for addressing direct and indirect forms of gender bias have emerged from the literature. Drawing on their findings about the cumulative effects of gender differences in the allocation of overall academic duties, Barrett and Barrett make recommendations that focus on the planning and management of workload models (e.g. monitor and review gender gaps; ensure transparency) and suggest a more careful career planning and support in light of women's career's patterns (Barrett & Barret, 2013). Another form of intervention targets career support for women drawing on the evidence that introducing mentoring schemes improves career trajectories and overall job well-being (Dutta, et al., 2011). While agreeing on the positive effect of mentoring schemes, Van Den Brink and Benschop also argue that more structural action should be devised in order to break fossilized patterns and practices of gender inequality, for instance incorporating gender awareness training and practices, especially in recruitment, and devising more specific strategies in relation to different academic contexts and cultures (Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

## 4. Methodology

This qualitative study involved a two part investigation. The initial phase focused on the identification of key themes for the investigation drawing from the review of the relevant literature. The second part entailed data-collection through semi-structured interviews with female academics in the School of Psychology across the different career stages. A total of twelve in-depth interviews were conducted. The sample consisted of three PhD students, three Post-doctoral Researchers, three Lecturers and three Senior Lecturers/Professors. It was initially anticipated that the School of Psychology would approach and recruit participants. However, after a meeting of the SWAN self-assessment team, it was decided that the investigator (as an independent researcher) would be responsible for making contact with staff members and Ph.D. students and organising the interviews. The position of the investigator as an independent researcher played an important role in the interaction with the participants and had a considerable impact upon the kind of information that they were able to discuss. The interviewees were generally frank and open to comment on all themes. On the other hand, as a feminist researcher working in academia, the investigator was also aware of running the risk of imposing gender-oversensitivity on the research and has made considerable effort in avoiding leading questions during the data collection.

Interviews aimed to gather respondents' perspectives on issues that might affect, positively and negatively, the progress of their academic career in relation to their experience as female academics, explore possible obstacles and concerns, and provide pointers for departmental strategies. Drawing on a review of the research topic and relevant literature the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) revolves around the following themes:

1. Present career stage, with a focus on working commitments (including time dedicated to pastoral care duties), unstructured expectations and strategies to meet working commitments.
2. Career progression, with a focus on comparison with others (particularly male colleagues), perceptions of others and possible sources of concern.
3. Comparing current status with previous professional stage, with a focus on expectations, hopes, disappointments and compromises.
4. Collegiality with a focus on full membership in the academic community, support mechanisms and role models.

The study follows appropriate methodological and ethical research standards. A request for ethical approval was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Politics, International

Studies and Philosophy. It was agreed that the research meets the relevant ethical principles, in accordance with the School's Procedures Governing Ethics in Research, and no amendments were needed. The research was carried out at Queen's University Belfast between September and October 2013. Interviews were anonymous and were recorded, upon consent. Interview transcription was outsourced by the School of Psychology and the data is now stored by the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast. The investigator is committed to protect participants' confidentiality and has made considerable effort in ensuring that interview excerpts quoted in the report respect participants' anonymity. The following sections contain a thematic analysis of the interview findings.

## 5. Research Findings

### 1. The School of Psychology

Interviews generally reveal a positive assessment of the School. Participants felt that the working and academic environment of the School is generally inclusive and sensitive to gender issues. None of the interviewees said they have ever experienced episodes of sexist behaviour or language. The majority of them commented positively on the efforts made within department to support women and to provide a family friendly environment.

A senior academic states:

*"Since I've been here I've never felt there's been anything to do with my gender that's ever sort of come up really, to be honest. [...] I think with the school initiative in place and they really do go to a lot of effort to try and make things equal. I mean, I know it doesn't affect me directly but there are a lot of initiatives in place to deal with the fact that women may have childcare, well, women and men may have childcare responsibilities so as to make sure the meetings are taking place within reasonable hours so that people can go and get their kids from school or whatever, or nursery. I think there's been a provision for people coming back to work part time after maternity leave and so on."*

Similar comments emerge from interviews with another member of staff and a PhD student:

*"I think the school is doing a lot already so I appreciate it, for example, in our previous work places we never had like a lunch for just the female staff and things like this."*

*"Yes, I would say that it is mostly inclusive, people do their best to welcome you and make you feel comfortable and give you advice and collaborate with you and answer your questions"*

Nevertheless, the picture becomes more complex when interviewees discuss their experience as female academics more broadly and in relation to their professional involvement outside the immediate working environment of the School.

In fact, a senior academic states:

*“We’ve got ourselves into a position where we have quite a lot of senior women and actually our management committee is composed of more women than men. [...] Within my own school I don’t necessarily feel that my gender is a big issue. I suppose that it becomes, it seems like more of an issue once you actually get involved in university activities so if you go along to activities that are, say for example involving directors of research typically you’ll walk into a room which will be three quarters men rather than women.”*

Interview findings reveal the diverse and complex experiences, expectations and concerns of the group of women academics who participated in the study in relation to their current professional stage and career trajectories. While experiences vary depending on career stage and personal circumstances, it is also possible to trace some recurring patterns and issues that highlight some of the hidden costs of being a female academic.

## **2. Gender matters (to a varied extent)**

Interviewees felt that gender has an impact upon their experience in academia and their career progression to a varied extent. As anticipated, there was a clear discrepancy between the perspectives of PhD students and (some) junior level academics and those of interviewees who hold more senior positions. The former generally felt that gender does not necessarily play a significant role in shaping their professional experience and focused on other issues that might have an impact upon career progression such as merit, competence, job insecurity.

A PhD Student says:

*“Yeah, I don’t feel any different from any of the other male PhD students or female, in the sense to do with my PhD is just as important as everybody else’s and my work is important. There’s definitely a level of respect, I think, between all the PhD students so I think everybody respects each other’s research [...] Yeah, I definitely feel that within my peer group there’s definitely a level of interest and respect between all of us, male and female so there’s definitely support there.”*

Similar comments were echoed in interviews with junior academics:

*“To be honest I don’t know if gender has played a large role”*

*“I would say that I don’t notice it particularly, I can’t really speak for the entire department but particularly for my lab there’s myself and a male Post Doc and we do the exact same job, we’re given the exact same responsibility and I don’t feel, especially in regards to my supervision, there is no distinction at all based on gender.”*

By and large these excerpts continue to produce a positive picture of the School's environment and participants felt that efforts are made to ensure inclusivity and equality of treatment. At the same time interviews also highlight important differences that can be ascribed to the gender-gap in specific disciplines. Interviews in fact suggest that those working in male dominated disciplines might have a much more immediate sense of gender differences, for example by often "being the only female" , compared to those who work in areas where there are more female academics. While not necessarily feeling discriminated against, some participants observed that working in a male-dominated environment might sometimes feel rather challenging.

An early-career academic remarks:

*"Sometimes I find it hard because I think there are a lot more males in (my discipline) maybe more and also part of my PhD I work with a biomedical engineering company and the engineering company actually made my device and stuff and it's all males but that's because it's engineering and I don't know why that is, ( in a previous project) for sure I was like one of the only females that actually worked on my project but I didn't feel discriminated against at all and I don't really notice it but I would say in my field there is probably more males than females, for sure."*

She then adds:

*"Yeah, I think sometimes, sometimes I will like, sometimes I think I come across as being quite young because I look like a young little girl. Sometimes I'm a bit like I don't want people thinking that I am kind of a little princess because I'm not and I do actually work really hard but sometimes it's really easy for people just to kind of look at you and then form an impression that's not actually true."*

A member of staff recalls similar experiences, particularly in relation to her previous professional stage in another institution:

*"With my other supervisor I had this initial experience and he didn't know me very well, I think he didn't take me seriously because I was a girl. He is an older guy so I think more old fashioned so it was more like a traditional..... And I think also because you don't get too many female researchers in this area or maybe you do but not very successful researchers. So I think in this area it's a bit more difficult to be a female researcher."*

She then continues:

*"Yeah, actually one thing that I could mention is that when I finished my PhD I felt that maybe I was less supported than some male PhD students. So like they didn't want to offer me a Post Doc that I could say after my PhD I'll do a project and I think it might be that if you have male supervisors maybe they feel if they support a woman maybe people will think oh, there must be some reason, either professional reasons or something. So I felt that they were less happy to support me than some male students who were not so. I didn't feel they were better than me, basically."*

On the other hand those working in female-dominated subject areas describe a more positive experience. For instance a senior academic states:

*"I'm a developmental psychologist and so that means all of my research is with children and actually the majority of developmental psychologists are women. So if you go to developmental psychology conferences and you're involved in networking of developmental psychology you don't have this experience of being in the minority which I think in some areas of psychology you still do. So from that point of view I don't think that I've ever felt I'm, you know, being in a discipline where there are quite a lot of women and also having good role models around me, I don't think that I ever felt disadvantaged by the fact that I was a woman."*

This also applies to a PhD student, who says:

*"Erm I haven't encountered any gender issues so far, it's more like because the programme that I'm doing at the moment is developmental psychology and I would say it's mostly dominated by women. I don't know how men are there in this particular section. [...] Yes, this helps a lot because if it was another area, for example, neuroscience, perhaps I would have a little more concerns there in terms of it's more, there's still females there but as far as I know there's only one or two women in our department that do neuroscience"*

She continues:

*"Maybe (women are) not necessarily taken seriously that much. I mean, in very high positions, so far my experience is having not encountered in my own personal career but I've heard stories so I'm aware of it."*

### **3. The importance of role models**

When asked to reflect on their professional experience and career history, several interviewees recalled the importance of having somebody acting as a mentor who would encourage them to apply for promotions and/or funding applications and, more broadly, provide advice on career progression. In many cases, these mentoring figures were female senior colleagues and/or PhD supervisors.

In recalling a crucial stage in her career progression, a senior academic talks about receiving encouragement from a senior colleague:

*"I was really lucky in that I had a woman, she was a senior lecturer at the time and she was very aware of gender issues in particular, she was actually, I think I didn't really think of it in those terms ever but not long after I started, I think it was only a few months after I started she went through my appraisal form and she said 'well, I think you should apply for an extra increment because you need to earn this and this' and my reaction was 'oh no, I don't think so, I've only just started, you know, people will think I'm being really pushy'*

*She played a really important role, I think, in my career because again, I think the next time she said 'right, you need to be thinking about promotion' and again, I said 'well, I've only been here one year, I don't think so' and again, she was saying 'no, no, you know, you've got to, let's have a look at your CV, you're missing this and this, so these are the things you need. She was very strategic about it and I know a lot of other people who didn't have that sort of support and who started a similar time as me and are still*

*lecturers and I think that they shouldn't still be lecturers, you know, they just haven't, no one told them you should be applying for promotion, you should be doing this. And so she was, the whole way through she was brilliant, really, really good. So that helped.*

Similar experiences are also described by other interviewees:

*"One thing that made me sure I wanted to come here was there was a female professor on the panel from the school and I thought, well, that's positive, that's good to see, you know, there is obviously progression here, there is the possibility to advance your career. So she in a way would have been a bit of a role model for me and I could see that she had come through and, you know, she was very good at what she did."*

*There was one of my tutors at the time who was a woman and she kind of took me under her wing from the point at which I was an undergraduate and I think really throughout many years then of my career I've kind of had her as a role model and now she's a very good friend and I've known her now for 20 years, you know. So I think for me at the time I didn't kind of, I would never have thought necessarily of her as being a mentor or a role model but actually that's the role that she put herself into for me and I can see it look, you know, looking back on it rather than at the time I wouldn't necessarily have been aware of that. So I think for me that was very, very useful to have someone there who was kind of championing me right from the start and I could literally from when I came in as an undergraduate and was then encouraging me to do a PhD. She wasn't my supervisor, she then encouraged me to a PhD and then when I finished my PhD she actually moved to a different university, to set up a project there and she encouraged me to move (there) as well. [...] So I think having somebody like that probably made a big difference right from the start and I'm not sure all women necessarily have that under those circumstances.*

Some PhD Students and early career academics also stated that having a considerable number of female academics working within the School and occupying senior positions is an extremely encouraging factor in thinking about their career progression. They often mentioned female members of staff as their role models. For example:

*Yes, I do, I think there's a lot of females in this school who have done amazing things and like they also have a family and children and still juggle and they're professors at the top of their game and I think it's great but again, they worked really hard for it and they did have to like live in a different country and move around and stuff. So erm yeah.*

*"I'm really lucky because my immediate boss and my PhD supervisor was, is the same person that is my current immediate boss, so I was hired by the same person, it's a female and I think having a strong female role in my life academically has really helped. I don't see being a female is disadvantaged by any means. I do sometimes find that the disproportionate amount of men in our Department and in various groups means that there is sometimes the feeling of being the outsider of the group in some respects but*

*very few, very seldom. So, I think I'm lucky that I've got a strong female to kind of look up to."*

*"Whenever you were talking about role models, I mentioned my supervisor but after her person, the lady who is just the one year above me, she's doing at the moment a Post Doc research, something which I'm hoping to do, she is like a role model to me and I do compare myself to her.*

*"My supervisor is a female lecturer and she's fabulous so I kind of aspire to be a bit like her, you know, to be able to balance and to have a life, you know."*

#### **4. Women only spaces vs. "preferential treatment"**

The previous sections suggested that participants generally feel more positively about working in an environment where there are other female academics. Most of the interviewees commented positively on the importance of having female role models. Interviews also highlight that being under-represented might result in female academics experiencing additional concerns about their professional abilities and the ways in which these are perceived in their working environment. This is in line with the extensive literature that highlights the gendered impact on career confidence and expectations. As argued earlier, the literature and the SWAN Action plan suggests, providing "women only" spaces and support mechanisms, such as mentorship schemes, are among the strategies developed in order to address aspects of the gender gap in academia and increase job-related well-being. Interview findings, however, also reveal that participants feel ambivalently about these initiatives.

Some perceived them as a form of preferential treatment, while others expressed a sense of guilt in being able to access this kind of support mechanism. This sort of ambivalence emerges more prominently in the interviews with some younger researchers who, given the initial stage of their career might not have had experience gender bias to a great extent. At the same time, these attitudes might also indicate an internalization of the tendency to reduce structural inequalities to the personal level (Morley, 1994).

The following excerpts are particularly illustrative:

*"To be honest, I really don't agree with women only lunches. They've had a couple while I've been about and in a number of instances some close male friends of mine happened to go into the kitchen for a cup of tea and were told to leave. Now, one of these men that went in is possibly the biggest feminist I know, I mean I'm not, I wouldn't really classify myself as any sort of, I don't know what my feelings are towards, I just think everybody should be treated equally but we shouldn't marginalise people because*

*they're either male or female or whatever. I don't think that having a women's lunch now without men, I just think that's just as bad as what happened to women in the past, I don't see why kicking men out of a women's lunch is a good thing."*

*"I think it's a good thing that there's a mentoring system but I just, I just don't think it's right that there's things available to me that aren't available to him and I don't know how to rectify that, I don't think it's the Swan's job to fix that but I just don't think that I should be getting more services available to me than him just because I'm female. Maybe if it was something more a bit like childcare, something like that which might be more relevant but this was just general mentoring."*

On the other hand, some comments reveal a general acceptance of explanations that link the gender-gap in senior positions in terms of women's individual choices, rather than structural inequalities:

*"in our school there are a lot of women in comparison to males although, interestingly and that's the whole point of this on I'm sure, is as you go further up the ratio, the ratio changes. But then we were having a conversation about it and maybe, maybe there are more male professors because maybe women just either don't want to go that far or maybe it is because of the child issue, not the child issue but they go and have children and they fall behind a little bit in their career and maybe having children then changes their aspirations or maybe it is because, you know, employers are looking for males as opposed to females. I don't know which of those it is but where I am at the moment in my career I don't see, if anything, I think women have it, not easier or better, certainly not but we have far more support and services available to us than males do."*

Other interviewees suggest that, given the casualization of research employment and insecurity of their current professional position, they might have more in common with their male peers rather than with female academics who are in permanent employment:

*"I think, yeah, but I kind of think like everyone would like it. I don't know if I'm necessarily alone in that, I think any guidance is always welcome. In particular I feel like I would love to know like, for example it would be good to go here or it would be better for you to leave the UK or whatever, like any kind of guidance would be great but, yeah, I kind of think that's generic enough, I think we all could do with it. But, yes, it would be nice."*

*"I think I feel I've more in common with a male (colleague) because of the uncertainty, because we don't know what's going to happen next, you know. I'm not yet in a position where I feel like I could even think about having a family because I don't know where I'm going to be in two years' time. Whereas I think the stability that comes with having like a lectureship and stuff, I feel women in that position have more of a, maybe, not more leeway to think about this but more security because they know they have their job and they know that that can't change if they take maternity leave so they can come back to that job whereas I don't think that I could even think about having a family because I don't have that security."*

Finally a number of interviewees reveal that there is sense of guilt associated with accessing support mechanisms. For example a PhD student states:

*"I worry that if I sought out something to even make me more different like oh, the mum's club or something or the parents club, I would feel that that would, I don't know if that even makes me more of a minority in the university, I don't know.*

*So I try to work round things myself, you know, I don't really ask for help at all but I don't know what the university could have done because, you know, I chose to do the post grad, I chose to do the PhD so me going in there and saying I've got kids and I just feel really bad at the minute or really stressed out at the minute, I just don't feel the university would be sympathetic to anything like that."*

A mid-career academic expresses similar concern, even though with an awareness that these measures are necessary given the conflict between work and family responsibilities and the pressures to stay on top of things :

*"maybe you do feel it, like sometimes you feel like you're getting special treatment. If it wasn't like that there around this situation but then I kind of, if you didn't get special treatment around that period you'd probably be lost to the system because you just think, I can't cope in any shape or form with all of the things that are going on around me and life would be much easier if I just found a career that was a little more 9 to 5, it didn't come home with me in all the very many ways that could be made to come home with me. "*

##### **5. "A continuous balancing act"**

Given the significantly increasing extent of professional commitments, mid-career and senior level academic expressed a critical and reflexive views on the impact of gender around issues such as increasing pressure and responsibility, work/life balance, credibility and respect. As their career progresses so do professional commitments and duties (from teaching to administration, from research to grant applications, from scholarly and editorial activities to membership in committees, to name but a few). All the interviewees talked about developing strategies in an attempt to balance multiple working commitments and the growing workload associated with an academic position. Interviewees observed that there is not a direct gender bias in the allocation of pastoral care duties. However comments also suggests that some of the participants might find it difficult to be assertive and refuse to take on additional duties, such as teaching for example. As the literature suggests this has a cumulative effect on the overall workload, leaving less time for research activities and, as an extension, it could have a negative impact on research outputs and profile (Barrett & Barret, 2013).

Concerns about attempting to deal with multiple commitments as effectively as possible are expressed by mid-career academics. For example:

*I think it's incredibly difficult to do it, mainly because the more teaching you have, the more students you have, the more fractured your thinking becomes, the more fractured your time becomes, you know, you're switching, switching, switching, switching and you don't have the sort of dedicated space and time to consider your research aspects of*

*things and that's where things tends to start to fall apart, you know. You can't create some space in order to be able to focus on those types of things and before you know it, you know, the semester has started again, students are coming through the door. So to be honest I think it is incredibly hard to do. The other thing is when you are a teacher or you're a good teacher or you're a happy teacher, you know, for you, you find you're provided with more opportunity to do it because people ask you to participate, asking you to contribute, asking you to do things. And sometimes it's very difficult to be able to sort of stand back and say, hang on a minute, no.*

For Senior academics managing multiple roles and commitments becomes even more challenging:

*"Erm it's just always a real balancing act. Sometimes, I think you always feel like you're never really doing everything 100% effectively because you're always trying to do, trying to sort of do everything at once or trying to, you know, (inaudible) organising your time*

*"I think what's difficult for me at the moment is that I have a lot of responsibilities and it's very hard for me to see how I'm going to get rid of some of that. And I feel that unless I do that or unless something changes drastically I'm just not going to be able to progress my research side of my career to the extent that I really want to and that concerns me because I just feel I'm kind of in a hole where I can't see the way to get out in terms of getting rid of various responsibilities that I've taken on. And I don't think I've been very good about being assertive and saying, look my workload is ridiculous or look I can't do, you know, please don't ask me to do that or I just can't, you know, I just not prepared to do that. And I think that that is something that unless I sort that out it's just going to get worse. You know, unless I kind of learn to be more assertive in saying look this is completely ridiculous and I can't do, x, y and z within this time frame. Now, I know I'm clearly, I'm not the only person who is extremely busy but I do know that from my own personal perspective that's how it feels like from the inside, that things have to improve in terms of the amount of simply non research work that has to be done. "*

*My workload, I suppose I can just only describe it as a nightmare [...] I was aware that it would be a challenge and I don't think anything prepared me for the extent of the challenge*

*I try to defragment time [...] If I take control of my time I can decide when the meetings are. [...] I can then take a little bit more control of that and then create some more space towards the end of the week.*

*But it requires a hell of a lot of energy and drive and I suppose passion, I mean, that's the thing is I would have got into research, I never forget why I chose that career [...] And I think it's always keeping remembering why you're doing it and ensure you kindle that passion and don't let it die inside in spite of everything else that goes on around us because we are privileged in that we do the jobs that we do.*

## **6. Job security and "Being a proper academic"**

Another set of themes to emerge from the interviews regards concerns around job security in an increasingly competitive working environment and insecurities the participants might have in regards to the requirement of "being a proper academic". As anticipated, issues of job insecurity

and doubts about career progression are a matter of greater importance for PhD students and early-stage academics. For example:

*Oh definitely yeah. I mean, I guess it's the nature of post doc that you only get such short contracts, but mine have been really short like 6 months in a year is the longest I've ever been given and I've been able to roll them over each time. But it's difficult and I understand it's funding and we have to find the money but still, you know, not knowing if you can like sign the lease on somewhere for a year, you might not be here in a year and you might not have money in a year is difficult to deal with.*

*"I have to pay my rent, I have to pay my bills, I have to have a job before the end of this PhD in place. [...] that's something that's been preoccupying my mind and things and I have got a job in place and I've sourced that myself. Now, it's not a job I want to do but it's a job because I am going to run over with my PhD and I just need something so that I can still stay where we're living, you know, and pay my rent and pay the bills"*

*So erm yeah, and part of me, like I don't really mind moving country at all but then part of me is a bit like aww I'm kind settled back home, do I really have to look for a Post Doc in Australia or somewhere. And even though I've done it before and I know I'll be fine and I will move country and I would love it, it's still that kind of do I want to leave my family and stuff and my boyfriend with me, how would he feel being like oh, she wants to pursue her career and I'm going to have to move too. So, I don't know, I think it's just really uncertain, I'd say that's the problem with academia, you never really know and that's going to be my life for at least the next like ten years, so I'm kind of like ah, ten years of not being in a solid job, it's just kind of stressful. So that would be how I feel.*

Some members of staff also identify the transition from junior-level to a more permanent academic position as one of the most challenging moment in their academic career. For example:

*I think probably the worst time for me was during my Post Doc I worked so, I worked hard obviously doing my PhD but then I worked so hard during my Post Doc and I was writing loads of papers and I wrote a book and I was doing all this stuff and basically, and applying for lots of grants and every single grant got rejected [...] I remember for a whole year just feeling like anxious*

*"Whenever I finished my PhD that there wasn't a natural sort of, what could I put, how could I put it, it was very much down to me. It had to be me, you, you know, it was hugely unsupported and that in some senses lends itself not risk taking being, you know, playing safe or whatever else and when I saw the post-doctoral opportunities around me here that were positive I probably chose those, even though I had been asked by people at other institutions would I like to come [...] And I think that there needs to be something done at that level to support women coming through and education, you know, at the end of the education and sort of saying, we're still kind of here behind you and we're, you know, in some way or another we're going to train you or help you negotiate that transition.*

Together with job insecurity and casualization of work, research has highlighted the gendered impact of other practices resulting from the incorporation of "new managerialism" into the higher

education system. Underlying this framework is the ingrained notion of “a proper academic” which, as it was argued earlier, would often seem to be modelled around a male, middle-aged and middle class (Skelton, 2004). Research also suggests that “being a proper academic” is often seen as a position to be struggled for through drive for efficiency, effectiveness and research excellence. Standards of academic performance- associated with proactivity and productivity- are assessed according to excellence and scoring systems. These practices are influenced by gendered factors, such as family circumstances for instance (Baker, 2010). As the following excerpts indicate, these issues often become a matter of concern for our interviewees.

Reflecting on how her family circumstances impacted upon her career progression, an interviewee states:

*Because I have seen maybe people who are my peers who I would have often associated within my own school system [...] And they've all surpassed me with regards to their careers partly because they've been able, they have had that multiple employer situation as opposed to me having limited options unless I really, really want to drop everything and go, you know. And I don't think I had fully internalized that until I was well into a post doc really.*

She then continues in relation to the scoring system employed in order to define parameters of academic performance:

*You're very much based on your metrics, you're age, how long it's been since your PhD, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. [...] And that kind of mentality and that kind of, it can be very damaging particularly where maybe it doesn't really take into consideration life, all of the things that might have happened in between. [...] So it's that idea that you can't, you need to be competitive and you need to be competitive immediately and you need to do it now and la la la la la and that there's no space in between. If that goes on constantly, that pressure, you end up single with no kids, you know.*

A similar assessment emerges from another interview:

*You have to define what excellence is, you have to define what performance is particularly in research areas because for psychology it's very different from medicine which is very different from civil engineering or architecture, whatever or politics, you know. So, there's not this appreciation of diversity I think, there's a bit of a one size fits all mentality so we're going to apply these metrics to everybody. Let's get that paint brush out and we'll give everybody a coat of paint in the same colour, you know.*

The following quote highlights a struggle between perceptions around the proper academic and the actual experience of family commitments:

*And I suppose if I look back on it but one of the things that was behind that feeling too, I mean, if you're thinking about your identity as an academic is that because I still had a young child [...] I wasn't able to spend every weekend working, I still can't spend every weekend working because I have to make time for my son, you know. So I can't be one of those people who work 24/7, 7 days a week. And although, you know, I do work*

*longs hours I tend to only start working in the evenings after he's gone to bed and so on. So it's in some ways I think if I think about my own work patterns I think, oh, you know, probably I don't work the way as most (male colleagues), you know, who probably do nothing else but work.*

### **7. "Maybe it's just me": gender differences and career choices**

Despite the diverse experiences and perspectives illustrated by the interviews, one specific theme recurred consistently in the majority of interviews. Participants were asked whether, drawing from comparison with their male colleagues and peers, they felt that gender influences the ways in which men and women approach career choices, confidence and expectations. Responses by and large support the idea that male counterparts are usually seen to be more proactive, self-confident and more assertive. On the other hand interviewees felt that, as female academics, they are often more cautious and less self-confident. They often worry more about being perceived as "complainers" and are more likely to take on additional duties. What should be noted is that the majority of the interviewees were rightly wary about making generalisations based on essentialized notions of gender differences. However some also tended to downplay the significance of these differences by implying that perhaps this might be a personal example or simply anecdotal evidence. While there is a need to enquire more deeply into these perceived gendered patterns of career confidence and performance –for instance by including male academics in the research sample- these sorts of responses are indicative of the struggle between internalizing and accepting perceptions that tend to reduce structural inequalities to the personal level and challenging these very perceptions on the grounds that they are socially constructed (Baker, 2010; Morley, 1994).

The following excerpts are particularly illustrative:

*"Well I think so, I would often compare myself to maybe some male colleagues who might have been coming through at the same time as me. I would have been a lot more anxious and nervous about going abroad as a lone female with no contacts and no, you know, and the safety aspect of that and I would have always, more I always felt the guys were a little bit more (inaudible) about it, I mean, they didn't have the same stresses and fears about it that I would've carried as a woman going out on my own"*

*"Yeah, I would say there is, I think that I'd rather feel more the need to prove myself than maybe, but I think that's probably just me, I don't think anyone ever makes you feel like that, sort of like no, I'm like female and I want to like show that I can do science and....I don't know, yeah. I think there probably is a little bit of that but not that anyone ever makes me feel like that."*

*"I think, that you, you know, this is maybe where you see a sort of gender difference in how you approach these things where, you know, I tend to just say things, you know, if I don't like it I just complain[...] And you really feel bad about it, you feel like oh my*

*God, people are going to see me as a complainer, like a moaner in every sort of light things and at the same time, you know, having conversations with male colleagues in the department and they say oh if you don't like something, you just go and say it and it's such a matter of fact and everybody's sort of thinking oh my God, are they complainers or not but there is that sort of feeling that, you know, maybe because you're a bit more sensitive, maybe because of whatever individual differences but you sort of feel a bit guilty and ashamed that while I guess from a man's perspective it's not necessarily like that. But in light, it's very sort of anecdotal evidence in terms of what I feel."*

*"I think it's hard to say, it's really hard to say. My overall stereotype of men is that you have less self doubts and they just go for it but that's a stereotype, I mean I have no evidence whatsoever for this around but they would just, they wouldn't think twice about it, where I think maybe for women sometimes, you know they'd doubt themselves a bit more but that's just a blanket over everybody and sort of generalising."*

*"I suppose this is very personal, you know, in that way but my partner, he has just finished his PhD and I was just thinking in terms of the way that we've done it, you know, I think that men sometimes can be very logical and I don't know that's maybe a very, very big over generalisation. But, you know, there's not a lot of like, he never talked about needing a boost of confidence or he never talked about needing help or support, you know, it was always like, I'm meeting the supervisors, we've got this and this on the agenda and it will be done.*

*"No, I mean, I think that, it's true that that sense of not deserving it or feeling guilty or somehow that you've sneaked through or cheated in some way and you're going to be found out. I mean men do have those feelings too but I think it is more common amongst women academics. It is and I very strongly had that feeling at that juncture in my career, very much so. "*

*"I do think, yes males will be more selfish and think about what's in this for me whereas the females are much more intrinsic and they're much more, we'll do it for that. [...]So I think you do have that selfishness, I would say but it's very much about them. Whereas the females will do it for the sake of ... for the scope or do it because we need it to get it done."*

## **8. The issue of motherhood.**

Finally, as the literature suggests, parenthood and caring responsibilities have a considerable impact on women's careers (Baker, 2012; Skelton, 2004). Among the participants there was a general acknowledgement that motherhood is, for obvious reasons, the most visible gendered issue in shaping career progression at the intersection between professional /personal choices. Some interviewees expressed concerns regarding the prospect of having children and the professional implications associated with this experience:

*"I suppose it sounds very, very silly because I feel that I'm not ready for any this but you do kind of try to factor in family, you know, as you grow up and I know it, I'm not at the stage where I'm thinking about it yet but you know, I've just said to you in 10 years' time up what career do I want and that's going to depend an awful lot on what I have or*

*where I'm going at that stage and I'd love to have children. And I think I suppose in terms of gender that way that's always going to be the kind of cut off point, it's like what you know, where do you go from there and what's going to be best, you know, for your family unit. But that's really the only thing, you know, I suppose I'm quite lucky."*

*"I'm in my late 30s now and if I want to have a child and go on maternity leave, the whole thing is going to put another break in the research. So on top of that, if you want to accommodate for your own personal life which you kind of accommodate anyway and you think oh no, this is not the right time, this is not the right time, I need to pass probation, I need to do this, I need to do that, I'll just have a child afterwards. And afterwards is becoming more stressful because if it's not probation, it's something else and then you think yeah, I've just finally managed to get my teaching into a routine and I know what I'm doing, I've done these lectures before, I just now have to make sure that I concentrate on my research. So, you know, once things have kind of calmed down a bit you think well maybe I should have a child and it's like well no, I can't have a child because I'm going to be out of it for another year and then God knows how I'm going to feel during my pregnancy, you know. So, these things as a woman, it really affects you."*

*If we were to have kids, yeah, I don't know, I almost can't envisage it because it's too big and I'm always amazed how successful the careers of female colleagues who have kids are, I just don't actually understand how they do it. And they always seem to be here really early and here really late and you think how are they achieving it but I think it must be very hard*

Other interviewees commented on the challenging nature of being a mother and an academic, discussing issues such as the attempt to balance their professional and personal responsibilities, dealing with pregnancy in a working environment, and returning to work after maternity leave. These experiences cut across the spectrum of interviewees, from PhD students to senior members of staff. For example:

*"I feel like for the past six years I've never given my family 100% attention ever and I have a lot of guilt about that, to be honest. [...] So even though everybody gets to where they have to be, like the girls get to school on time and the housework gets done or the homework gets done, everything gets done but sometimes it's a real mountain to climb to get it done so I always feel like once this PhD is done then I will be a better parent, I'll be a better person"*

*"With teaching and admin it's so hard to do, to get through your research priorities and do the things you want to do in terms of research. And I think if you then add children into the equation, you know."*

*I think that I didn't really appreciate the extent to which even just having one child, how disruptive that was going to be with everything. So, for example I had an extremely difficult pregnancy which, in which I was really quite sick but still able to walk about, do you know what I mean. So it was not like I was hospitalised I was still able to walk about. But, and I was still into work most of the time during my pregnancy and so on but to be honest I just could not be productive during that time because I just wasn't well enough. And I kind of think that often people now say, oh it's great that pregnant*

*women are just treated like anybody else and, you know, that, you know, they're not ill they're pregnant and they should be able to still get on a do a day's work. For some people that's just not true to be honest, it can be an extremely difficult time.*

*I don't think I really appreciated that when you come back to work then the difficulties of trying to juggle a child going into early childcare and working full time I found that very tough. So I suppose if I look back on it, having a child I think took at least two years out of my career where I really wasn't productive. And that's something that's it hard to know how you make up for.*

## 9. Summary and conclusions

Interview findings reveal different and complex experiences, expectations and concerns of the group of women academics who participated in the study in relation to their current professional stage and career trajectories. Experiences vary depending on career stage and personal circumstances. However it is also possible to trace some recurring patterns and issues that highlight some of the hidden costs of being a female academic.

By and large interviews reveal a positive assessment of the School of Psychology. Comments indicate that the working and academic environment of the department is inclusive and sensitive to gender issues. Participants commented positively on the efforts made to support women and provide a supportive environment for those with caring responsibilities. However, the picture becomes more complex when interviewees discuss their experiences as female academics more broadly and outside of the immediate working environment of the school.

Interviewees felt that gender has an impact upon their experience in academia to a varied extent. As anticipated there was a discrepancy between the perspectives of PhD students and some early-career academics and those of more senior members of staff who expressed more reflexive and critical views on the issue. The former felt that rather than gender other factors such as merit, competence and job security play an important role in shaping their career. Comments also indicate that those working in male-dominated discipline often have a much more immediate experience of gender differences (often by being the only female) compared to those who work in female-dominated research areas. While not necessarily feeling discriminated against, the former observed that being under-represented might often present challenges, for instance the perception of "needing to prove yourself".

When asked to reflect on their career progression several interviewees commented positively on the importance of having role models and mentors who provided advice and encouragement during key stages of their career, both through formal and informal mechanisms. In many cases, these mentoring figures and role models were female senior colleagues and/or PhD supervisors. Some PhD

students and junior academics also found that having a considerable number of female academics working in the School and occupying senior positions is an extremely encouraging factor in thinking about their career progression. Interviews findings therefore provide further supporting evidence for the effectiveness of mentoring schemes.

On the other hand, comments also reveal that some participants felt ambivalently about interventions that target women only, such as women's lunches, mentoring schemes and flexible working patterns. Some perceived them as a form of preferential treatment, while others expressed a sense of guilt in being able to access this kind of support mechanisms. Perhaps some effort could be made in order to clarify the rationale and the evidence behind these positive action initiatives.

Interviews also highlighted the challenges around increasingly complex workloads and the strategies developed by interviewees in an attempt to balance multiple working commitments. Interviewees observed that, while there is not a direct gender bias in the allocation of pastoral care duties, being assertive and refusing to take on additional responsibilities, such as teaching for example, might be often difficult. As the literature suggests, the monitoring and review of gender discrepancies in the allocation of responsibilities and the actual time dedicated to them might help reduce the cumulative effect on the overall academic workload for female academics and, as an extension, reduce the likelihood of a detrimental impact on their career progression (Barrett & Barret, 2013). Given that the School has recently adopted a workload model the recommendations for gender sensitive measures in the management of academic workloads developed by Barrett & Barrett might be relevant for future planning.

Other important issues emerging from the interviews relate to concerns about the casualization of employment and the insecurities raised by the requirements of "being a proper academic". Interviews are consistent with the literature in highlighting how ingrained masculine norms of conventional success and academic performance are often detrimental to female academics. Interviews also suggest that the casualization of employment and job insecurity are a matter of increasing concern particularly for those at post-doctoral stage. While addressing this kind of issues would require the implementation of effective structural measures at university level, the mentoring scheme already in place in the School of Psychology provides the ideal mechanism where some of these concerns could be addressed.

Finally two recurring themes emerged consistently across the interviews. Firstly, when asked to compare their career choices and expectations to those of their male colleagues, interviewees identified gender differences whereby they, as women, are usually seen to be less proactive, confident and assertive of men in their career choices and expectations. It must be noted that many

respondents tended to explain these differences as anecdotal evidence of personal behaviour and choices rather than as a result of socially constructed norm. While there is a need to enquire more deeply into these perceived gendered patterns of career confidence—for instance by including male academics in the research sample- and resist the danger of reifying gender stereotypes, it is also important that institutions are reflexive on how these gender differences might be reproduced in organizational practices.

Secondly, there was a general agreement on the huge impact of motherhood and caring responsibilities upon women's career. Some interviewees expressed concerns regarding the prospect of having children and the implication this might have for their professional status. Other interviewees commented on the extremely challenging nature of being a mother and academic. Members of staff commented positively on the support received within the school, however it might be worthwhile considering whether these support mechanisms are also effectively available to PhD students with family caring responsibilities.

## Appendix 1 Interview Schedule

### 1. Your career now: Working commitments, Unstructured expectations, Concerns

Could you briefly describe to me your current professional stage?

Are you satisfied with the kind of work that you undertake?

Do you have any anxieties/concerns in relations to your working commitments and workload?

-for PhD students and early career staff, in relation to future opportunities?

Do you feel that academia is a stressful working environment? Does your experience reflect that?

What is the he most stressful/time consuming part of your job?

Do you feel that your gender has any impact on the kind of duties and work tasks that you are expected to perform?

Do you undertake pastoral care duties? Do you feel that there is a difference in this respect with your male counterparts?

Are you able to balance the demands of your work-life? If so how?

### 2. Career progression: gender differences, perceptions of others, concerns

Are you satisfied with the rate and nature of your career progression?

-for PhD Students what are the main features that will shape your career progression? (pointers: networking, merit, publications)

How does it compare with your male colleagues? Do you feel that there is a substantial difference?

How do you feel about comparing your career to your male counterparts? and other female colleagues?

How do you feel about how your career progression is perceived within your department/institution?

**3. Comparing your career now with your previous life /professional stage: Expectations , Hopes, Disappointments, Sacrifices**

How difficult was to get to where you are now?

Were your expectations and hopes met?

- for PhD students, what are your hopes and expectation?

Have you encountered some unexpected obstacles, difficulties?

How have you dealt with any obstacles and/or with rejection, disappointments, and difficulties?

Do you ever feel that in order for your career to progress you (will) have to make sacrifices? (pointers : research interests or in relation to work/life balance?)

**4. Collegiality, Belonging to the academic community: Career advice-Space for voicing concerns**

How do you feel included in the life of your academic community? (pointers: equal member, able to contribute to decision making, etc.)

For PhD students/early careers

- do you feel encouraged to participate in the life of the academic community? If yes, in which way?
- Do you feel encouraged in those areas relevant to building an academic career (pointers: publishing, funding application, networking) How does it compare with your male fellow PhD students/colleagues?

Do you feel your work is valued by colleagues, by your institution?

Do you feel there is a space or mechanisms available to you where you can openly address and/or talk about work/career related concerns?

Do you ever feel pressured to remain silent about these difficulties in order to preserve a professional image?

Do you feel a sense of solidarity with other female colleagues/mentors?

Would you like to add anything else that you think might be relevant?

## Appendix 2 Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Research Project:

“Hidden Costs of Being a Female Academic”

School of Psychology

Queen’s University Belfast

- The project has been fully and adequately explained to me and I understand what the results will be used for.
- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. Thus, I can withdraw from the project at any time.

- I consent to my interview being recorded
- I understand that excerpts of the interview might be quoted anonymously in the research report
- I consent to the recordings of my interview being stored within the archives of the School of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast.

Signature of Participant:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

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