

## **Three conditions for equality: feminist organising at the University of Galway**

**Ruggi, Lennita**

*PhD candidate, University of Galway*

**Abstract** This article investigates the recent history of the University of Galway and its controversial gender crisis. The current prioritisation of equality, diversity, and inclusion in Irish higher education policy was accomplished by long-term feminist efforts. The analysis connects political action from the 1970s and 1980s to contemporary organising in work-related campaigning. In examining two high-profile legal cases of gender discrimination and the subsequent activism, the paper argues that collective, continuous, and combative feminist work are conditions to change the power relations and produce gender knowledge. The long-term roots of the local collective feminist struggle show that demands for equality are daily sustained by efforts that are necessarily communal and often anonymous, in which we can all take part.

**Key Words:** Feminist organising, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in higher education, University of Galway, history of Irish higher education, memories of struggle.

## Introduction

‘The people who lead change are the people for whom change is needed’.  
(Hodgins 2021, p. 15)

Conservative historical perspectives explain women’s historic exclusion from universities as an effect of ‘restrictive Victorian social attitudes’ that ‘prescribed traditional gender roles’ (Walsh 2018, p.16, p.119). The implicit understanding guiding such framing is that ‘progress’ has since then been achieved, so much so that current inequalities can only be read as unusual anachronisms in contemporary societies, as exemplified in the following account: ‘It was striking (...) that the traditional pattern of female under-representation at senior levels persisted even with the gradual modernisation of Irish society and the decline of religious influence in higher education’ (Walsh 2018, p.355, italics added). This reading of change as the ‘progress’ that overcomes tradition in the name of modernity denies the existence of structures of exploitation based on gender in the present. It thus blurs the long-term conflict required to ensure the success of aspirations for equality. Political organising has always been crucial to transform institutional rules and grant gender parity in higher education (HE). Indeed, research demonstrates that late 19th and early 20th century campaigners directly influenced legislation of women’s access to HE (Breathnach 1987, Broderick 2001, Pašeta 2010).

Inspired by scholarship on the origins of transformation (O’Connor 2014, Chemaly 2018, McAlevey 2018, Ahmed 2021, Berry and Worthen 2021, Hodgins 2021), this paper examines the recent history of the University of Galway to argue that the current prioritisation of gender equality in Irish HE policy (HEA 2018) was a result of long-term feminist organising. The empirical analysis raises questions on widespread assumptions that change is a prerogative of leadership or senior management (O’Connor 2020, Bailey and Drew 2021). Instead, it shows that to transform injustices suffered by individuals into demands for equality, political work needs to identify, criticise, and challenge unequal systems. Moreover, it focuses on ‘memories of struggle’ (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015), which are taken as important tools to help us understand where to place our hopes and our efforts. The three conditions for equality identified in the study relate to such collective, continuous, and combative feminist work.

A parallel argument sustained in the paper emphasises the role of conflict in producing knowledge. The increasingly sophisticated analysis of academic gender inequality done in Ireland is a direct legacy of the 2010s gender crisis at the University of Galway. Hence, the shape and availability of data are enmeshed in political struggles (Scott 1998) and directly related to how far the gender policy reaches and where it focuses. The recent history of the University of Galway demonstrates the importance of persistent attention to what is knowledgeable and how knowledge can be used (McGoey 2019).

## Methodology and Methods

This paper is part of a PhD study on equality, diversity, and inclusion efforts at the University of Galway. The research is based on a decolonial feminist ethnographic methodology (Leyva et al. 2018), encompassing four years of on-site and on-line participant observation, document analysis, and interviews with staff (Ruggi 2022). The account offered here draws primarily from written sources to describe feminist actions at the university in terms of work-related activism. It connects episodes in the 1970s and 1980s to a momentous gender crisis emerging in 2014, focusing on the legal complaints of gender discrimination raised by women lecturers. The references intentionally divert from prominent international scholarship to highlight the work done in Ireland to challenge discrimination in HE. The study aims to show that equality demands have roots in the local collective feminist struggle.

## Memories of feminist struggle

### *1977 Admin strike*

Galway was the stage for the first public sector administrative staff strike in Ireland. The strike began on 17 January, 1977, involving 85 workers, primarily women. They fought to have their newly established union branch<sup>1</sup> recognised by the university and to negotiate several demands, including parity on working hours with staff in other universities, internal advertising of new positions, and formalised maternity leave (Gibbons 2020). The decision to strike was taken after a year of unsuccessful written communication with senior management. Gibbons states that the need to strike was an ‘oddity’ (2020, p.1) because unions were then readily recognised in the public sector. The hostility to collectively bargain with the administrative staff seems to have been partially driven by misogyny and workers declared that senior management treated them ‘like little girls’ (Cooke 2013 cited in Gibbons 2020, p.3). Uí Chionna (2019, p.223) explains the antecedents:

[T]he almost exclusively female administrative staff began to be supplemented with male graduates, who were invariably given more senior positions. With the prospect of advancement for women – most of whom had their Leaving Certs and secretarial college training but no third-level qualifications – effectively stymied by the arrival of male graduates, there was increasing support from among the female workforce to secure a better deal for themselves.

Strikers described withholding the university keys and picketing the gates in a collective action that became increasingly entrenched and supported by many academics, fellow university workers, and the Students’ Union. The effort resulted in a ‘resounding victory’ (Uí Chionna 2019, p.226) and a ‘complete caving in by the College’ (Unity cited in Gibbons 2020, p.8). In

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<sup>1</sup> A part-time branch within ITGWU (*Irish Transport and General Workers Union*). As explained by Gibbons (2020, p.2) part-time branches were ‘located in the workplace and the functions of union organiser and administrative support were undertaken by members of the branch rather than by full-time paid staff of the union’. In 1990, ITGWU merged with the FWUI (Federated Workers’ Union of Ireland) to form SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union).

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a labour court mediation, most demands were met. Mary Cooke, an administrator who took part in the negotiations, celebrates the outcome: ‘we got a thing that was very unique, that they couldn’t advertise posts without internal notice, that posts should be advertised internally, and that was a big coup. And we couldn’t be transferred either without consultation. And we got a consultative committee’ (quoted in Uí Chionna 2019, p.226). Catherine Lyons describes how, in the aftermath of the strike, six or eight women organised a walk-in to occupy the ‘staff room’, a space previously off-limits for administrative staff:

[A]ll the old professors were there, and they nearly died, when they saw us marching in. And we marched up and ordered our tea and coffee and we sat down. And they used to have these kind of seats in the centre, that’s where the academics sat, you know, the satellites would be outside. But we sat down in the middle, we were just making a point. (...) Nobody said anything to us. And so we established a right to go there, that’s how that right came about. Well, it said staff room and we said well we’re staff (quoted in Uí Chionna 2019, p.228, italics added).

These accounts reveal legacies of resistance that sustain ongoing struggles for transformation, and demonstrate the collective intergenerational, and often the anonymous, character of political work. The university’s history reveals that women’s activism has been an important dimension for institutional transformation.

### *Demanding and monitoring policy*

HE policy was consistently incited and monitored by feminist scholars. In 1984, a study showed that ‘women are not formally excluded from the academic profession but (...) are most surely confined to a small and powerless space within it’ (cited in Smyth 1996, p.16). This resulted in the creation of a Committee on the Position of Women Academics in Third-Level Education that, although denying the existence of overt discrimination, acknowledged that ‘procedures, processes and attitudes’ retarded ‘desirable change’ (Hayden 1995, p.9).

The creation of Women’s Studies centres in the early 1990s established critical anchorage to produce knowledge and promote change (Lynch 1995, Byrne 2022, Scriver et al. 2021). Feminists condemned the ‘Times Heals All’ syndrome (Clune 1996), raising the need to examine institutional commitment and policy efficacy<sup>2</sup>. Funds from the state, from philanthropical donations, and from unions helped ensure the continuation of efforts (O’Connor 2014). Feminist academics publicly criticised their institutions (The Irish Times 17/06/1998, Liberty 10/05/2018, Pollak, The Irish Times, 8/03/2019) and several initiated legal action against their employers. Such efforts were sustained by ‘tenuous but effective’ networks of solidarity from colleagues, students, and peers, administrators, and outsourced personnel (O’Connor 2001, Hodgins 2021) who developed ‘coherent communities’ (Rich 2003, p.28) or ‘complaint collectives’ (Ahmed 2021) capable of denaturalising gender inequality.

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<sup>2</sup> One question related to ‘why UCG [University College Galway], for example, ha[d] an extremely active Equal Opportunities Committee which has produced one of the best documents on Sexual Harassment, but so far ha[d] not succeeded in securing a crèche’ (Clune 1996, p.143). Indeed, Uí Chionna (2019) explains the realisation of the crèche depended on the initiative of the Student’s Union, and its management is currently outsourced.

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The Higher Education Equality Unit (HEEA<sup>3</sup>) held a conference in Galway in 1995. Debates encompassed constraints faced by women academics in terms of horizontal segregation, barriers to promotion, and maternity leave, as well as the gendered dimensions of the work of administrative staff, librarians, caterers, and cleaners (Egan 1996<sup>4</sup>). Amongst the hundred or so participants listed in the proceedings feature the names of Mary Dempsey and Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington, whose cases changed Irish HE two decades later, as discussed below.

The history of Irish HE demonstrates the relentless need to assert the existence of gender inequality is directly related to the institutional instability, a sign that despite feminist efforts, change ‘is not inevitable, total or permanent’ (O’Connor 2017: 106) and ‘gender equality in higher education has been neither simple nor linear’ (Drew and Canavan 2021: 13). Grummell et al. (2009) point out that the enactment of equality legislation partially silenced gender debates; this was not because of highly successful outcomes of 1980s policy but a sign that ‘the issue of gender (in)equality in 2010 has largely become invisible’ and lost legitimacy. Thus, many younger academics in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘were shocked when they learned of the current low levels of female representation at senior levels of academia’ (Linehan et al. 2009, p.414). For most senior managers, gender equality was ‘done with’ and ‘off the agenda’. Critically-oriented disciplines (like equality, disability and development studies) were defunded and in danger of closure by the late 2000s (Lynch and Ivancheva 2016, p.74). Most Women’s Studies Centres in Ireland (including the one in Galway) were merged into mainstream disciplines and left without a ‘intellectual home of their own’, becoming relatively invisible.

In 2002, the HEA terminated the HEEU and did not reallocate its remit until 2014 (O’Connor 2014). Despite a 2004 report recommending institutions to produce Gender Equality Action Plans, no structure was put in place to monitor its implementation (O’Connor 2008). From 2004 to 2012, no data was collected or published about the gender breakdown of HE staff (O’Connor 2017). In 2012, HE gender data could only be obtained through Freedom of Information Request (Coate and Howson 2014). In this sense, ‘data’ should not be understood as a given or as pre-existing activism, as if it was simply ‘collected’ by researchers and policy makers; data is a tool in political disputes. Indeed, two high profile legal cases were necessary to bring gender inequality back into the public discussion.

## **Recent legal cases of gender discrimination**

### ***Mary Dempsey’s Case***

In May 2014, the Equality Tribunal (now Workplace Relations Commission) upheld Mary Dempsey’s complaint that she had been discriminated against on the grounds of gender and disability (the complaint of discrimination on the grounds of family status was dismissed). She was subjected to ongoing discrimination affecting her contract and conditions of employment and recurring unfair treatment and intimidation by managers. Dempsey was awarded €81,000

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<sup>3</sup> Unit that replaced the National Unit on Equal Opportunities at Third Level in 1992 with a remit that included ‘gender, socio-economic background, disability, sexual orientation, race, ethnic origin and religion’ (Symth 1996, p.18).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Pat Morgan for generously facilitating my access to this and other mostly inaccessible publications.

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compensation and the right to have the title of lecturer restored to her contract. The university appealed the Decision but later reached an agreement. It is instructive to detail her experience as presented in the legal case.

The first woman to teach in the Industrial Engineering Department, Dempsey started working in the university in 1994 in a series of temporary positions that lasted for more than ten years. She was the only academic kept in such precarious contracts for so long in the Department and had a heavier teaching load than her colleagues. In 2004, Human Resources conceded she had the right to permanent employment under the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act, 2003. However, the contract she was offered in 2005 removed ‘lecturer’ from her title and, therefore, revoked her entitlement to participate and vote at faculty meetings, apply for research funding, or avail of sabbatical leave. She signed it under duress, being on maternity-related sick leave when it was negotiated. In 2007, Dempsey was offered a contract as a ‘University Teacher’ that similarly did not reinstall her lecturer title, even though she was named as such on the university’s website.

Heard by the Equality Tribunal, the Director of Human Resources said that ‘the post of Lecturer is filled by open competition following an interview and having demonstrated competence in teaching and research’ (cited in Duffy 2014, n/p). Despite verbal promises and a mention in the Strategic Plan for the Department (2003-2007), the university never advertised a post on Dempsey’s area of expertise. Due to the ‘new downgraded contract’, her teaching load increased, resulting in less time to engage in other activities. Paradoxically, in 2006 she applied to move from teacher below the bar to teacher above the bar but was denied because she was deemed to fail in the area of research and contribution. She successfully appealed this decision, despite continued hostility from her line managers. In her complaint, Dempsey offers the example a ‘male comparator’ who received more favourable treatment. He joined the Department around the same time as herself, also as a Temporary Teaching Appointment (TTA), but was placed on a higher point of the increment scale.

She raised this issue with the HOD [Head of Department] and she maintains he made a comment to her that “he had a family to support” and “be happy with what you have got”. She said that this male colleague was facilitated throughout his career, his post was eventually advertised and he was successful in becoming a Junior Lecturer in or about 1999. He was also facilitated with 2 paid sabbaticals and uninterrupted periods for research purposes to do his PhD while she was not facilitated (...) During 2001/2002 she said that her lecturing hours were increased to facilitate the above-mentioned male lecturer to take a sabbatical. (...) She was asked by the HOD Professor to carry out work during her maternity leave, including correcting examination scripts and presenting a lecture for another Professor who was also on a sabbatical. She said that she then applied for unpaid maternity leave, putting together a list of all the work she had done during her maternity leave and sought additional time off in lieu for from HR. In or around April 2002 while she was still on maternity leave she refused to do some work for the HOD and he made a comment that he did not know how the University would give her another contract in lieu of all the time she was taking off and that he had a Department to run. She believes this amounted to a threat not to renew her contract (Duffy 2014, n/p).

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Dempsey continuously sought to remedy the issue internally, seeking help from her union, Human Resources, and the university president. In 2008, the University Equality Policy introduced a provision for staff members to raise grievances, and Dempsey presented her case. She was, however, prevented from appealing the unfavourable outcome delivered in printed correspondence because she was out of the country on work-related projects and, once she returned to work, the 10 days for appeal had already expired. Ironically, the university's legal rebut to the Equality Tribunal in 2009 relied on the statute of limitation – arguing that Dempsey's complaint was outside the statutory time limits of 6 months.

Dempsey provided a detailed and consistent timeline for the ongoing discrimination and compiled a record of official documents to build her case. A review of Industrial Engineering in 2002, cited in her complaint, states that the '[d]epartment should be aware that it was relying on a non-permanent staff of a particular gender, i.e. females, to fulfil its teaching duties' (cited in Duffy 2014, n/p). The Senior Lecturer Appeal Board, also a part of her complaint, openly stated that Dempsey 'suffered uncertainty about the continuation of her employment – during a period when the University did not cover itself in glory in relation to the treatment of TTAs. (...) [and she] suffered a number of indignities at the hands of the University, the Department and one colleague at least' (cited in Duffy 2014, n/p, italics removed).

It is important to foreground the effort involved in compiling a discrimination archive, to keep track of institutional shifts in titles and procedures, and to translate the functioning of a university into legal terms. It is part of the long-term labour of making inequality visible. The records Dempsey compiled show the internal power struggles and the slow work of creating a practical institutional agenda for equality. Many unidentified people were involved in composing the documents acknowledging Dempsey's unfair treatment. The legal decision offers, thus, meaningful insights about the accumulation of disputes materialised in internal documents like the ones Dempsey presents in her complaint. This underlines the meaningful role of the everyday bureaucratic acts of countless nameless people working within the system to transform it. Dempsey's case, although unique in many aspects, is revelatory of ongoing structural gender inequality, as other cases demonstrated.

### ***Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington's Case***

A second legal decision against the University of Galway was issued in November 2014 and involved the botanist Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington, an employee since 1980. After her fourth failed attempt at promotion to Senior Lecturer in the 2008-9 round, she learned that only one of the 17 successful applicants was a woman. The Equality Tribunal found she had been discriminated against on the grounds of gender and the redress instructed the university to retrospectively promote Sheehy-Skeffington, pay her a €70,000 compensation, and review the policy and procedures in the promotion schemes for senior lecturers.

Sheehy-Skeffington's complaint asserted that 'the over-emphasis on research to the detriment of teaching is deeply gendered. (...) [W]omen carry the bulk of the university's teaching load, allowing the men to focus on their research and, therefore, are promoted more quickly' (cited

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Mannion 2014, n/p). She maintained that informal male networks – old boys’ clubs – mentored male applicants, providing them with an unfair advantage and facilitating their entry to leadership roles. The prevalence of men in senior positions and decision-making bodies (87% of the professors and 81% of the Academic Council in 2014) reinforced the imbalance in the composition of the promotion panels. Six men and one woman interviewed Sheehy-Skeffington. The Equality Tribunal condemned the self-contained circularity of power structures and the lack of autonomy: ‘the Registrar was on Dr Sheehy-Skeffington’s interview board and was also involved in hearing her appeal. It would have been preferable if somebody independent of the interview process heard the appeal.’ Sheehy-Skeffington affirmed the internal appeal process was merely a ‘tick box exercise’ (cited in Mannion 2014, n/p).

Giving evidence to the Equality Tribunal, the external referee that participated in the Sheehy-Skeffington promotion panel said that he sought previous access to the marking scheme and the assessment guidelines but got no response from the university. There was no training, no pre-interview meeting, and the collective mark was awarded against his recommendation. The lack of planning and transparency in the process made it very hard to even place a complaint against it. Sheehy-Skeffington (2016, p.22) explains that:

The university offered very little written evidence on how exactly I or any of the candidates were marked. Candidates were scored in three different categories: Teaching, Research and Contribution to University/Society. Under an FOI [Freedom of Information Request], all I received were notes of what I said in my interview, with three scores (one per category) at the end, as well as the scores for each category for each ranked candidate. There was no rationale or explanation, even for my own scores (...). In addition to this dearth of information and evidence from the university on how candidates were scored, my lawyers advised me that I had to prove that I was better than or equal to at least one other person who was successful. To achieve this, I needed access to all the shortlisted candidates’ applications. The university refused to supply this, on grounds of breach of privacy, but was eventually required by the Tribunal to hand over the information on all the shortlisted candidates. What I received was heavily redacted, with identifying details removed. (...) I then collated all the information from the files, and compiled a matrix in Excel for each candidate, including myself, under each category sub-heading, as per the application form.

The requirement of a legal mandate to access the information necessary to evaluate the promotion scheme seems to reveal the lack of transparency in decision-making processes. Remarkably, the Equality Officer made a point of expressing her ‘gratitude to whoever went through the thirty voluminous application forms and obscured the personal information (over 2000 pages) which greatly assisted this investigation’ (Mannion 2014, n/p). Comparing the applications, Sheehy-Skeffington proved the criteria were inconsistently applied, which demonstrates direct discrimination. Under the Teaching and Examination criteria, for instance, three successful male candidates had less than the 150-contact hours with students (which the guidelines present as a minimum requirement per annum). Still, they got higher scores than Sheehy-Skeffington. One of the successful male candidates had not even reached the top point of the college lecturer scale by the application deadline, so he was not eligible to apply.

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Although Sheehy-Skeffington's complaint of indirect discrimination due to gendered working patterns was dismissed due to lack of evidence, the Equality Officer identified evidence of indirect discrimination related to disclosing caring responsibilities.

The legal decision highlighted the importance of gender data: '[p]erhaps the most significant frailty to the respondent's rebuttal is the statistical evidence (...) [demonstrating] that male applicants have a one in two chance of being promoted to Senior Lecturer while women who apply have less than a one in three chance of the same promotion' (Mannion 2014, n/p). Sheehy-Skeffington submitted quantitative evidence of gender imbalance in the career ladder referencing the 'Report of the Working Group on Academic Career Advancement in NUI Galway' (Doherty and Cooke 2011). Interestingly, as explained in the Introduction to the Report, the Working Group was constituted because 'concerns were raised at Údarás na hOllscoile [the Governing Authority] regarding the progression of women to senior academic posts' after the 2008-9 promotion panel (Doherty and Cooke 2011, p.3). This is a telling example of the compounding efforts for transformation: the 'concerns' originated the data that was crucial to the legal decision.

The documents collected to support both cases give evidence of the efforts to transform the institution from within, and to identify different groups communicating and exerting pressure on each other. Indeed, the two legal decisions had a significant impact on the university's internal relations and created the momentum for the feminist campaigns described in the next Section.

## Discussion

### *Feminist organising*

Gender equality demands in HE gained momentum after the two legal decisions described above. Keeping in mind Strathearn's (2006) suggestion that documents are tools in power struggles, it is worth following them around to verify how they were used. For the promotion of gender equality in Irish HE, no document was more fruitful than Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington's. According to Quinlivan (2017, p.12), it 'disrupted the status quo' and became a landmark case that shifted power balances within the sector. The first person to use the case as a tool was Micheline herself, who went to newspapers before the moratorium period suggested by the Equality Tribunal was over. This is possibly one of the reasons why the university did not appeal her decision.

As a direct consequence of her disclosure, five other women who had been shortlisted in the 2008-9 senior lecturer round but not promoted started their own cases against the university with the support of the academic unions. Elizabeth Tilley pursued the issue in the Labour Court whilst Sylvie Lannegrant, Róisín Healy, Margaret Hodgins, and Adrienne Gorman took their cases to the High Court. The placards 'Promote the Five' and 'Promote Women Lecturers' in the picture below address their cause. Sheehy-Skeffington supported her colleagues by donating her award and publicly speaking against gender inequality in the media.

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Figure 1: Feminist demonstration



Source: O'Shaughnessy in Siggins (The Irish Times, 31/01/2015).

This feminist demonstration in the garden of the Quadrangle building is a key event in the history of the university. Gender relations became an institutional priority because of collective effort. Although the media did not widely advertise Dempsey's case, it was known by local campaigners. When I interviewed staff in 2020 and 2021, some people remembered the chants that said: *'Mary Dempsey won her case! Mary Dempsey won her case!'*. Several mentioned how the legal decisions *'brought so much out into the open, [that] they couldn't hide from it any longer'*, and that the gender crisis *'was all over the news and very much part of what everybody was talking about'*.

Indeed, an investigation of Irish newspapers corroborates the public interest. More than one hundred news articles were published between January 2014 and February 2019 (Oliveira Filha and Ruggi 2019). The initial reports expressed surprise and outrage, revealing gender inequality was not recognised in Irish HE; the journalistic interest was sustained during the following years due to the conflict between different stakeholders and the creation of Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington as a public personality. Newspapers developed a version of the events closely related to memories of feminism, drawing from her family history<sup>5</sup>. Micheline also emphasised her ancestor's legacy in media statements: *'I am from a family of feminists. I took this case to honour them'* (cited in Boland, The Irish Times, 6/12/14). Indeed, the feminist identity she claimed was crucial to collectivise her experience and it was also highlighted by feminist campaigners:

Micheline's win was the first time any woman in academia in Ireland or the UK had proved gender discrimination in relation to promotion. It was major news in both countries on TV and radio and in newspapers and was followed by the release in early December 2014 of statistics gathered by Ireland's Higher Education Authority, showing the percentage of women at each

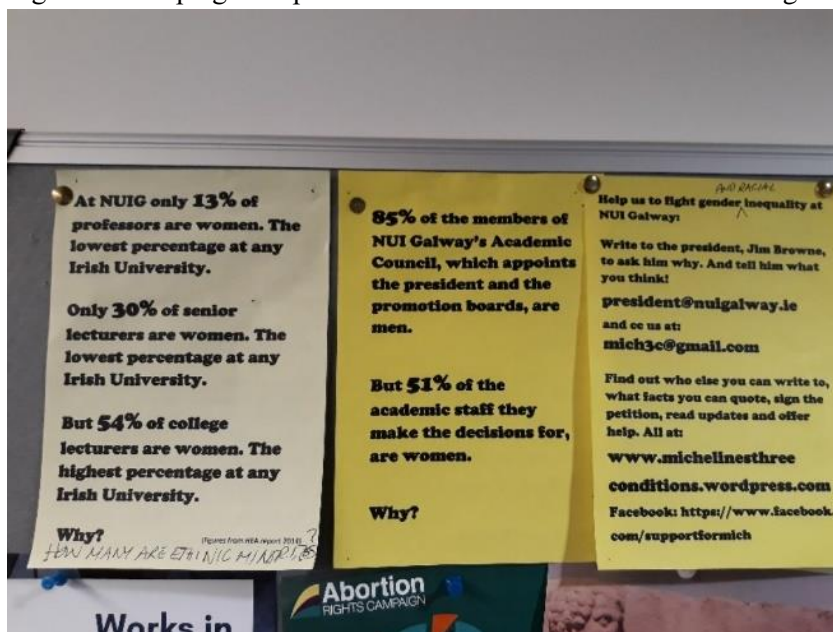
<sup>5</sup> Micheline's grandparents, Hanna Sheehy (1877-1946) and Francis Skeffington (1878-1916), were married in 1903, creating the equalitarian surname. Among the many feats of their lives, their fight for women's rights to education was prominent. Hanna was a member of the Irish Association of Women Graduates and Candidate Graduates (IAWG), founded in 1902, which defended the 'radical' agenda of full gender parity in education and professions. Francis resigned from his job as Registrar in University College Dublin in 1894 on a point of principle to support the admission of women to the college on equal footing to men (Broderick 2001, Pařeta 2010, p.190).

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level in Irish universities. The low percentage of women in senior academic positions resulted in another massive amount of publicity and genuine shock that Ireland was so poor in this sector, which had been assumed to be more enlightened. In fact, Ireland proved to be one of the worst countries in Europe for the university glass ceiling index, which puts a spotlight on the lack of women in senior academic posts (mich3c 2015, n/p).

When Sheehy-Skeffington's name was suggested as a member of an institutional Gender Equality Task Force, established in response to the gender crises, she placed three conditions to join: (i) promote the five women discriminated in the same scheme as herself, (ii) ensure gender balance in the subsequent promotion round to senior lecturer, and (iii) address gender imbalance in senior posts through quotas. The failure of the university to agree with the demands resulted in the creation of a campaign known as *Micheline's Three Conditions*. This activist group self describes as: 'not NUI Galway staff, but students, former students and others (...) able to organise things which would have been difficult for staff to undertake' (mich3c 2015, n/p). They launched a petition that gathered 4,233 signatures, fundraised to cover legal expenses, organised demonstrations, systematically generated media content and coordinated collective activism. Their blog was crucial for this research and undoubtedly very important to circulate information during the dispute. In the first semester of 2018, material from their campaign was visible on the university walls.

Figure 2: Campaigners' posters at the Hardiman Research Building



Source: Picture by the author, March 2018

Senior management's response to the gender crisis was antagonistic. The declaration that it was impossible to retrospectively promote the five lecturers outside the formal schemes was considered a lie and seen as a sign of unwillingness to address gender inequality. The campaigners were specially dismayed by the fact that the university applied at the High Court for a trial of preliminary legal issues, a stalling strategy that increase the costs and the duration

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of the legal process. The promotion of the lecturers became one of the catalysts for action. Several people followed the ongoing negotiations with senior management and the insulting comments about them ‘not deserving promotion.’ The settlement offers made were considered disrespectful. Firstly, because it proposed a ‘route for promotion’, that is, not a remedy to the discriminatory scheme, but a new assessment. Secondly, because the promotion would not be backdated to 2008/9. One of the lecturers, who was taking a Labour Court case, accepted this offer. The other four opted to continue the legal route. Only the appointment of a new president in 2018 made it possible for senior management to meet their demands for justice. Commenting on this, Sheehy-Skeffington said the new president ‘settled these cases so easily and so soon after coming into office gives the lie to all those claims by the previous regime that there was nothing they could do!’ (mich3c 2019, n/p).

The relationship between campaigners and senior management produced plenty of controversies and media coverage. Indeed, public attention was crucial to precipitate change. In May 2016, the university threatened legal action over a *Micheline Three Conditions* Blog post that allegedly ‘damaged its reputation’ (O’Brian, *The Irish Times*, 31/05/2016). An exhibition of the Secret Cartoonist organised by the Student Union was removed overnight in April 2015, even though permission had been properly obtained, generating another wave of public scandal. The comic strips themselves give a vivid account of the disputes around reputation. They use irony to denounce superficial initiatives that prioritise the university’s public image instead of changing the power structure. Indeed, campaigners criticised management ‘hypocrisy’ and denounced the actions proposed, stating they were ‘merely window dressing’ and that ‘[r]eality speaks louder than public relations drivel, no matter how you spin it’ (mich3c 2017, n/p).

Figure 3: The Secret Cartoonist I

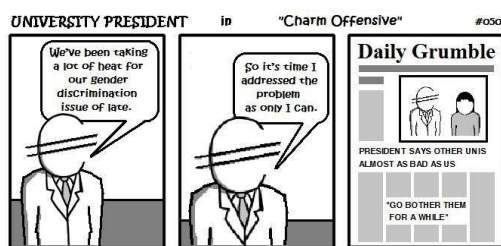


Figure 4: The Secret Cartoonist II



Source: mich3c (Micheline’s Three Conditions Blog) (2018 n/p).

A piece published in the Student Union’s newspaper shows the levels of antagonism and mistrust reached by the crisis: ‘I think it’s fair to say that the President is unnerved by the frequented negative publicity that the University has been at the receiving end of, recently. However, his recent attempts to address these issues of gender discrimination have only shed light on a need to control and orchestrate progress within the narrow remit of maintaining the status quo’ (Treanor 2015). Indeed, feminist demands were partially responded to and repurposed, shaped by what Walsh (2018) calls ‘constructive ambiguity’, that is, a willingness

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to accommodate conflict through partial concessions. In the national policy, gender equality became synonymous with breaking the glass ceiling (Ruggi and Duvvury 2022). Such policy approach naturalised a unidimensional understanding of gender that ignores intersectional dynamics. This was actively being disputed during the gender crisis, and campaigners themselves were challenged, as shown in the detail of the posters previously shown, where handwritten additions called for the broadening of the activist agenda (Figures 8 and 9). It seems fair to state that one of the main objects of disputes in gender equality politics has to do with what can be known.

Figure 8: Detail of campaigners' poster I

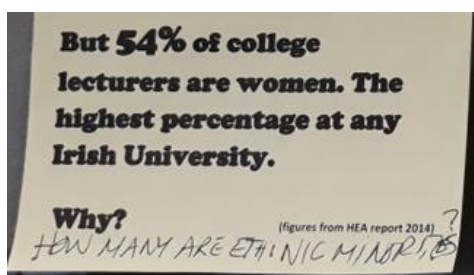
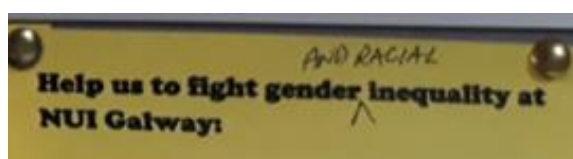


Figure 9: Detail of campaigners' poster II



Source: Picture by the author, March 2018.

Many other stakeholders assembled around the gender equality crisis, participating in the public debates at different moments of the protracted dispute. They included the Students' Union; at least 33 students' societies; both academic staff unions (SIPTU and IFUT); the academic cluster Gender ARC (Advanced Research Consortium on Gender, Culture and the Knowledge Society); the Galway Feminist Collective; the HEA and local TDs. One of the main groups whose importance grew due to the gender crisis was the University Women's Network (UWN). Established in 2012 by approximately ten women, the network was involved in raising awareness about the lack of women in senior positions. They worked to encourage women to stand for election for the Governing Authority, and negotiated with the Gender Equality Task Force to implement an institutional policy, ensuring gender balance in committees and assessment panels.

During the same period as the legal cases were publicised, the integration of St. Angela's College in Sligo into the University of Galway was about to be completed. The incorporation proposal demoted St. Angela's academic status from lectures to 'University teachers.' This was the same contract offered to Dempsey; it did not include a promotion route to professorship nor offered research grants or sabbaticals. Since the third-level courses offered at St. Angela's (nursing, education, and home economics) were mainly taught by women, the proposal was discriminatory.

Due to senior management's lack of engagement in negotiations, on 10 February 2015, the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) organised a one-day strike in St. Angela's with the support

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of 95% of its membership (McDonagh 2015). TUI's president stressed that the 'high-handed, undemocratic and confrontational approach [for the integration] is the product of an elitist mindset and from a university which has a proven track record when it comes to issues of gender inequality' (Quinn cited in *The Sligo Champion* 2015). Like the administrative strike described before, this movement was successful. St. Angela's academic staff maintained the title of 'lecturers', although with a caveat. A new type of contract (Lecturer A) was created emphasising classroom work (60% Teaching, 20% Teaching-related Research and 20% Admin/Contribution), differentiated from the traditional Lecture B (40% Teaching, 40% Research and 20% Admin/Contribution). Data from 2016 shows that the majority of type A lecturers (71%) are women, which again indicates 'constructive ambiguity' (Walsh 2018).

The collective effort created a successful feminist mobilisation. It empowered people to denounce improper actions and demand change. Irregularities in the appointments to senior academic and management positions were denounced by a senior member of the administration who made a complaint under the Whistle-blower Act (*Village Magazine* 2016, mich3c 2016). An invasive HR questionnaire requesting information about menstrual periods, breast and prostate problems was leaked to a local newspaper, resulting in its withdrawal (Bradley 2015). These examples are a sign of a larger movement challenging the university power structure.

It is important to highlight the role of activists in the production and monitoring of gender data. More than only scandals, the gender crisis created an unprecedented amount of knowledge about gender relations at the University of Galway and the whole Irish HE sector. It assured public scrutiny of data, budgets, senior appointments, and public relations. Campaigners verified the EU Glass Ceiling Index calculated by SHE Figures and spotted a mistake in data provision by the HEA, showing an inaccurate improvement of the Irish position between 2009 and 2015. This was rectified thanks to activists' monitoring (mich3c, 2016, n/p).

Within the institution, feminists questioned the gender imbalance of the newly appointed Deans (all men), of the new directors of Institutes and research programmes (95% male), and the enduring gender inequity in the Academic Council (more than 80%). Throughout the gender crisis, campaigners estimated the costs to promote the five lecturers, drawing attention to the accumulated loss they faced for not being able to apply for professorship grades and correlated pension loss (mich3c 2017, n/p). They also underscored that most of the 16 men promoted in the 2008-9 round had become professors by 2017. Campaigners monitored the university's Athena Swan applications and demanded a transparent process. They objected to the university receiving an award while the lecturers' cases were ongoing and urged supporters to follow Sheehy-Skeffington's initiative, sending letters of objection to the Equality Challenge Unit (mich3c 2017, n/p). In summary, the availability of statistics, their interpretation and their wider circulation were essential in developing and deepening the institutional gender crisis. The reverse is also true: converging tension and attention were essential for gender analysis.

## **Conclusion**

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This paper sustained two main arguments. Firstly, that transformation was achieved through collective, long-term feminist organising. Secondly, that the tension created by such demand for equality was crucial to producing knowledge about gender relations in Irish higher education. Indeed, a research interviewee stated:

There have been changes, and there have been changes because of two high profile cases taken against the university in Galway. Based on those two cases, subsequent cases were taken. I honestly feel that if those cases had not been taken, we wouldn't have even seen the kind of change we're seeing now. After those cases, the university put in a Task Force, appointed a Vice President of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Other universities followed suit. The universities started to engage with the Athena Swan initiative. A national Task Force was put in place, recommendations were put in place. For the first time, data was made available publicly about the different levels of gender imbalance for professorial post, senior lectureship, and so on. All of that has been prompted by people who took litigation. (Phil [fictitious name])

The recent history of the University of Galway teaches significant lessons about the origin and ownership of change. Political work is an effort that requires collectivising private issues in long-term intergenerational processes. Aspirations for equality blossom from the bottom, and they are a locus of knowledge production in cycles of engaged co-theorising (Leyva et al. 2018). The shift in power relations that resulted in the implementation of a new national policy for gender equality was an outcome of feminist action. This story relates to institutional 'identity'. Instead of taking the gender crisis as reputational damage, there is an opportunity to embrace and honour internal disputes that overflowed the university and transformed Irish higher education.

This study was developed under the premise that 'memories of struggle' (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015) constitute an important political resource for contemporary feminism. Contrary to historical approaches that frame transformation in gender relations as outcomes of 'progress' (Walsh 2018), the investigation foregrounded the ongoing fight against work inequality. It showed the efforts that made possible to build cases of discrimination on the grounds of gender and how the legal cases became themselves tools to further feminist mobilisation. It demonstrated that transformation was achieved through collective, continuous, and combative organising – the three conditions for equality. The description provided aspires to circulate memories of struggle to help feminists discern where to place our hopes and our efforts.

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**About the Author:** Lennita is currently developing her PhD on gender equality in higher education in the Centre for Global Women's Studies in the School of Political Science and Sociology in the University of Galway under the supervision of Dr Nata Duvvury.

**Author Contact Details:** [lennitaruggi@gmail.com](mailto:lennitaruggi@gmail.com)