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Glass ceilings and stone floors: an intersectional approach to challenges UK geographers face across the career lifecycle

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Abstract

While there has been a steady growth of women working in geography in UK universities since the mid-Twentieth Century, there are continuing challenges in gendered career progression and professional interactions within the contemporary discipline. These range from problems associated with employment precarity and inflexible work practices, life choices and obligations in the domestic arena, discrimination and bullying, to less tangible gendered norms and cultures in the workplace. This paper discusses these challenges and inequalities in the light of a brief overview of sector-wide statistical data on appointments by gender and career-stage and with the analysis of some 250 in-depth responses to a nationwide qualitative survey of gender and career experience in UK universities (Maddrell et al 2016). While the term 'glass ceiling' still has significant relevance, findings show a more complicated picture which also includes 'stone floors' and stumbling blocks. It also shows how career experience varies by institution and individual: challenges in career progression can be compounded by institutional protocols and intersectional factors, and vary with career stage. The intersection of early-career job precarity, reproductive decisions and associated family responsibilities were particularly highlighted in this study. These 'pinch points' in career development disproportionately affect, but are not limited to, female early career scholars. Early career progress may be stalled in mid-career in multi-staged promotional systems such as that in UK universities; some from minorities face compound barriers; men with caring responsibilities may face prejudice. The paper concludes with suggested strategies for change, highlighting the importance of individual university and department protocols and practices; line manager and other senior colleagues' attitudes and leadership in creating workplaces with an equality-driven ethos and structures that allow individuals to flourish.

Keywords: gender, United Kingdom, higher education, geography, early-career, challenges, strategies

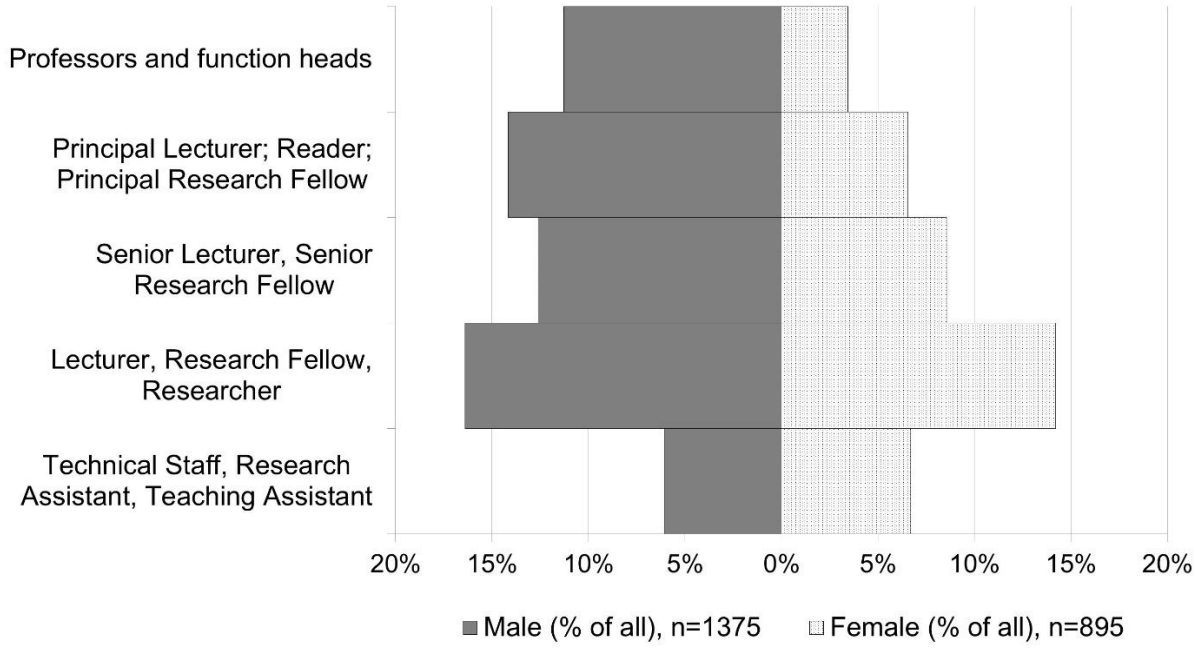
Introduction

UK Geography has always included women as students, teachers and producers of geographical knowledge, despite rear guard resistance to women's Fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society in the 1890s, and the subsequent marginalisation of women once the subject was securely established in universities from the early twentieth century (Maddrell 2009). The project on which this paper is based is the continuation of a long history of interest in gendered career progression and support for early-career academics by the Gender and Feminist Geographies Research Group (formerly Women and Geography Study Group) in the UK. Longitudinal research into the gendered experience of UK academic geography has moved from exposing the absence of women in the late 1970s (McDowell 1979), to changes in representation and the interactions between gender and power in geography departments in the 1980s and early 1990s (McDowell & Peake, 1989; McDowell, 1990), to a broader investigation of gendered career experiences and promotion within the UK system of staged career progression, including secondary statistics and quantitative and qualitative data from 253 women and men in UK Higher Education (HE) geography (Figure 1 in Maddrell et al 2016). Of the 253 respondents in this last survey, 137 were classified as early-career by age or career stage (i.e. below Senior Lecturer or of Senior Researcher grade), across both physical and human geography and from a range of institution types. Today there are more women than ever in UK HE geography, making up a higher proportion of the academic workforce than ever before, gains that are almost certainly the result of a ten-fold increase in the number of women in academia compared to a two-fold increase of men between 1978 and 2008, and a rapidly increasing proportion of female PhD students in the same period. There were close to equal numbers of men and women PhD students in 2008, with a current slight preponderance of women (Table 1 in Maddrell et al 2016).

The pool of women to be appointed, and subsequently promoted, is the largest it has ever been, but many of them are currently clustered in the early-career stages, the gender gap grows with each promotion grade, and the proportion of female professors, while growing slowly, is falling in larger (typically more powerful) UK institutions, as demonstrated in Figure 1. The *Times Higher Education* journal reported that the professoriate in large universities is being further masculinised: "While the total number of women in the UK professoriate grew by almost a quarter to 4,775 between 2012-13 and 2015-16… 37 percent of institutions with more than 150 professors saw the proportion who are women reduce" (2017).

Figure 1. Geographers on an academic contract by gender and contract grade (2014/15)

Source: HESA Staff Record 2014/15, Cost centre 124: Geography and Environmental Studies for staff on an academic contract (research, teaching or research & teaching).



These nationwide data mask complex histories and narratives. Discussing career progression through aggregate statistical data, even those which shine a light on disparities in gender and academic grade, elides ongoing inequalities and injustices within specific departments and the inequalities and experiences faced by individual geographers. Academic "success" for the one in four geography professors who are women hides both varied pathways to promotion and their contingent outcomes; these risks are "all the more acutely felt given the increasing pressures placed on academics within the neoliberal university" (Harrowell et al, 2017, 3), not least for early-career researchers who feel that admitting any 'failure' or setback is a career risk (Peters and Turner 2014).

Everyone has heard of the 'glass ceiling' facing women (and other minorities) in achieving promotion to the highest appointments. Despite the growing numbers of women promoted to the title of Professor of Geography in the UK, the outnumbering of three male to one female professors in geography suggests the 'glass ceiling' is, at best, still partially intact. However, the purpose of this collection of papers is to reflect on the experiences and needs of early-career scholars and their access to secure employment and career development. From this perspective, the data in Figure 1 show not only a 'glass ceiling' but also a 'stone' or 'sticky' floor effect: i.e. being stuck, held down, in entry-level work often characterised by temporary, insecure, and fractional contracts, with the accompanying obstacles and hurdles that serve to hinder pace and progress. Appointment as a postdoctoral contract researcher or fixed-term teaching fellow is now the typical entry point to an academic career, but the leap to a permanent academic post is harder for some than others. Even when appointed to a permanent position, workload can hinder career development and the recognition necessary for career progression. As

a consequence, many women, and some men, feel tied to, or trapped in, what might be broadly described as the entry level of their profession.

To explore these issues in more detail, this paper now draws upon the 253 in-depth responses to a qualitative survey of career progression, choices, status and experiences, with a particular focus on the challenges facing women in the early stages of their careers in the university sector. Responses to the survey highlighted issues and inequalities around social relations (bullying, harassment and discrimination), workload expectations, juggling the demands of a life outside work in a range of flexible and inflexible work environments, and the ongoing dominance of a white heteronormative (Hubbard, 2008; Crang, 2003) and ableist (Kitchin 1997; Chouinard 1997) culture in UK HE geography. The survey data remind us to ensure that in discussing early-career inequalities that we are aware of the ways in which people can experience multiple barriers to progression. This is often more acute when considering the ways in which people with varied intersectional identities experience differential access to progression.

Many of the conversations in UK geography departments about career progression and gender are currently centred around the Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter Marks, sector-wide initiatives promoted by Higher Education Funding Council England (Hefce) and led by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) that recognise changes to policy and practices that impact positively on achieving (gender and race) equality in career participation and progression (ECU, 2018). Initially focusing on science, technology and engineering (STEM) subjects, this initiative has recently expanded its remit and gained support form research council funders; consequently approximately half of all geography departments in the UK have engaged with the Athena SWAN self-assessment process and achieved a Charter Mark at Bronze grade or

higher[1]. This has made a very significant change in requiring universities and many geography departments to identify and address gender inequalities. It has also given opportunities for leadership in addressing these issues.

Early-career issues: from 'failure to launch' to mid-career 'stuckness'

> "Because I have been on a series of short-term contracts, I am always focussed on doing extra work in order to one day achieve some kind of long-term job security. This doesn't leave much time for having a life outside work. I also worry about my lack of career development most of the time, both at and outside of work." *Female 262 (26-34 years)*
>
> "Some senior staff fail to realise or comprehend how difficult it is to work as a junior member of staff at this university and they dump work on us at will." *Male 33 (35-44 years)*

Survey respondents wrote at length about the difficulty of establishing and developing an academic career. For some, looking ahead, it seemed an insurmountable challenge. For others, looking back, they wonder how they survived the demands placed upon them. Some reflected on their good luck at being in the 'right place at the right time', others wrote of the pressure to establish their career the 'right' way. Funding and accountability regimes are leading to increased specialisation, which has resulted in an "unbundling" of academic work into teaching AND/OR research. Research by Dyer et al in 2016 showed that geographers on teaching-only contracts rose from 18% in

[1] While initial take-up of the Charter Mark was slow, the suggestion that Research Council funding might be linked to holding an award spurred action and commitment at institutional and faculty/school levels. UKRI (formerly RCUK) expects equality and diversity to be "embedded at all levels and in all aspects of research practices, and uses "common schemes and benchmarks, such as Athena SWAN and HESA data" to be "consistent in their strategy and expectations" (UKRI, 2018). The Equality Challenges Unit now forms part of Advance HE.

2007/08 to 26% in 2012/13, reflecting the growing processes of neo-liberalisation in the UK university sector (see Ní Laoire C and Shelton, 2003, for earlier analysis on the casualisation of academic labour). The percentage of these on fixed-term contracts rose from 58% to 75% (compared to just 9% of those on combined teaching *and* research contracts being fixed term) with fixed term teaching-only roles disproportionately held by women: i.e. women are bearing the brunt of neo-liberalisation in higher education (Dyer et al 2016, 310, especially Table 1 and Figure 1). In a vivid metaphor, Dyer et al liken this disproportionate burden to quicksand, limiting the opportunity for future career development. Fractional contracts, especially short-term ones, create an extra layer of stress and uncertainty, especially for those relying on piecing together a portfolio of contracts in order to cover their living costs.

Academic identities often transcend job title and contract type, which can create and magnify advantage and disadvantage, especially barriers for early career scholars at key career transition points. Dowling (2008) notes that each stage of an academic career has its own stresses, be it pressure from supervisors, from peers, from heads or department managers, or from yourself; these cultural stories are deeply embedded in the shared experience of being an academic, including disciplinary reflections on trajectories of failure (Harrowell et al 2017; Horton 2008). University targets for student recruitment and satisfaction, research income and publications exacerbate these career-stage stresses, so much so that pathways towards secure employment have become both more varied, and for many, multi-staged. Respondents to the survey were acutely aware of the demands placed on them at crucial career transition points, in particular the expectations of external benchmarks such as the Research Excellence Framework (and the new Teaching Excellence Framework), the bar for promotion, workload expectations, responsibilities to students, and so on. While the majority of survey

participants with secure contracts sought less teaching in order to devote more time to research, early-career respondents overwhelmingly wanted *more* teaching, because teaching experience was seen as enhancing their employability (Maddrell et al 2016). However, the perception was that teaching, with its associated preparation and marking loads, still needed to be combined with high quality publications and a developing research profile e.g. through conference presentations, work as a research assistant etc for secure employment.

Needless to say, meeting all these demands simultaneously can be all-consuming, requiring extensive unpaid out of hours work. Such overwork can be seen as a necessary investment to 'jump start' a career, but not everyone has equal freedom or capacity to make such investment, and it is necessary to question a system that is predicated on such assumptions and inequalities. A key aspect of these inequalities relates to maternity in particular and parenthood more generally, particularly given the common overlap of early-career status and parenthood, and it remains a topic for discussion: Klocker and Drozdewski (2012) discussed how many papers a baby is worth, while participants at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Annual International Conference explored challenges and coping strategies in juggling academia with caring responsibilities of all types (Middleton and Street, 2017).

These challenges are evident in the quote below from an early-career woman with children reflecting on unachievable performance expectations in the job market, and masculinised discursive norms of what constitutes 'academic commitment' expressed by both male and female senior colleagues.

> "I have concerns about the need to work extra/excessive hours to secure an academic career. Not everyone has this time available … [but] this is what differentiates at interviews [and as stronger CVs] - and this is not recognised…"

Female 157 (26-34 years)

> "On several occasions, I have been told by senior female academics that if a woman has children she is signalling that she is not serious about an academic career! There are a lot of things that are said 'under the radar' that affect the chances of an academic career. Ironically, the last thing academia is, is meritocratic!" *Male 308 (35-44 years)*

Furthermore, it seems that the way in which research is increasingly audited and measured indirectly discriminate against part time academics as the emphasis is so often on full time academics generating their four high quality outputs for the REF evaluation. More generally, the increasing market-orientation of HE in the UK is producing an ever-narrower social group of career academics who are willing to undertake the excessive workloads needed to fulfil the increasing demands of university managers and student customers.

The quotes above highlight the concern of many participants in the survey, both women and men, regarding their suitability or "fit" in a marketized academia. Our analysis of this type of reflection suggests that established higher education cultures of overwork are ill-suited to allow for difference and are failing many early-career employees. This trend suggests that over time the sector will homogenise around those with the social, economic and cultural capital to withstand the often extreme challenges of early-career stage. This is a sobering thought, suggesting that dominant hierarchies could continue to sustain the discipline. In contrast, some universities and geography departments support new appointees, especially those taking on their first 'permanent' teaching-research post, through reduced teaching loads and providing a nominated peer mentor. There are clear benefits to proactively sharing good practice through

professional organisations and unions, as well as informal networks.

That the burden of precarious work in UK geography is borne primarily by women has implications for progress, particularly when temporary contracts combine heavy workloads and simultaneous exclusion from institutional support for career development e.g. limited or no access to internal and external research funds:

> "It is not my gender, but rather the gendered nature of temporary contract research status which I feel is holding me back in career opportunities and responsibilities" *(Female 262, 26–34 years).*

While the institutionalisation of self-exploitation and its associated inequalities needs to be critiqued and resisted, the existence of alternative routes to an academic career has the potential to be socially inclusive. A striking feature of the survey responses, and subsequent discussions in our presentations to departments and conferences, is that while there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to career strategies, being shown the possibilities of different paths gives confidence to those who may want to follow them. However, the ability to respond to these and other opportunities is shaped by wider cultures and contexts.

Resisting 'everyday' discrimination

The UK Equality Act 2010 makes discrimination or bullying unlawful when it is based on one of protected characteristics such as age, gender, sexuality. But the lived experienced of bullying may be a subtler range of experiences or practices that reflect discursive norms and a default mode of interactions, with a colleague or cohort (line managers, senior staff), or the ambient culture of an entire workplace.

> "Just the subtle comments or tongue-in-cheek jokes of less enlightened [male] colleagues... jokes about their discomfort being around 'so many women', or jokes about how useless they are at doing things women might be better at doing (like counselling students, etc.). It's the kind of silly stuff that just shouldn't be said but is anyway." *Female 48 (35-44 years)*

> "Very aggressive female line manager …. She suggested I sleep on someone's floor whilst pregnant so she could extend my contract in a city I no longer lived in by one month – I declined. [Female PI] reduced me to tears by saying she could not support me in my application for DIs as my work was very good but not excellent. I was doing 3 people jobs at the time whilst only work 2 days a week. I ended up off sick with stress and they appointed two people to help me by the time I came back a month later." *Female 43 (35-44 years)*

These two quotes from women in similar age groups and career stages illustrate the spectrum from 'everyday' sexism and discrimination to significant one-off or recurring incidents. 'Everyday' discriminations and bullying are particularly embedded and pernicious in academic culture (Todd, 2015). The small, normalised acts of exclusion are 'absorbed' by those who experience them. Not all respondents labelled these everyday experiences explicitly as bullying or discrimination, but there was discomfort expressed around women always being asked to take on pastoral roles, or doing teaching related administration, for example, typically low status and/or time-consuming tasks which previous studies show to be highly gendered in some departments (Maddrell, 2009; McDowell, 1990). Survey respondents from minorities further showed that experiences of sexism were compounded by other aspects of

intersectional difference such as class, ethnicity/racism and sexuality, including expectations that they undertake additional 'diversity' roles on committees, interview panels, open days, etc with little recognition of the additional workload. Students from minorities are also more likely to have had non-traditional routes to academic study and careers (ECU 2016), and survey respondents highlighted the complexities in awarding greater or lesser significance to different aspects of their identity and circumstances in relation to career outcomes:

> [The effect of my gender on my career has] "…been significant, in that my particular role as a mother has meant I was not free to do certain things. However, I have been, rather unusually, supported by a househusband at some points. Overall, my guess would be that race and class were rather more determinant (helping to explain my late entry into postgraduate study and academic work)." *Female 31 (45 to 54 years)*

Former President of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), Mona Domosh described the character, hurt and damage of everyday discrimination: "a glance, a comment, something mentioned or overlooked, made invisible or hyper-visible, a seat not taken or a body too close", each of which has a visceral effect, a physical toll, and results in some bodies being "othered" (2015). Normalised low-level sexisms, related exclusions or micro-aggressions inflect experience of the profession and can sediment into what Rosen (2017) described as a 'mountain of molehills', which constitute stumbling blocks to entry to, feeling at home in, and progressing within, academia.

With issues around mental health in academia being both increasingly well-documented and recognised (see Maddrell et al 2016), the survey responses highlighted the ways in which individuals found ways to cope, from taking formal stress-related sick leave to more informal tactics of avoidance, e.g. opting out of uncomfortable social

occasions or using the relative flexibility of academia to work at different times or away from the department in order to avoid a specific bully or uncomfortable/unacceptable milieu. These self-management strategies may offer short-term solutions but they clearly have their own costs. Protective strategies of spatial and social self-marginalisation limit choices and opportunities, including who they worked and networked with, and what subsequent responsibilities they were given within the workplace, all of which potentially impacting on personal-professional fulfilment and career progression.

In considering the micro-aggressions of everyday discrimination, it is important to remember the advantageous counterpoints that are routinely being performed in departments where discrimination is experienced. Respondents also reflected on the 'everyday advantages' they experienced, revealing the discrimination that their co-workers would experience: male respondents especially identified the social capital they gained from a shared interest and/or participation in sport, which provided a shared language and discursive frame for social interaction with senior, usually male, colleagues, which in turn translated into privilege within the academy (e.g. being given teaching opportunities). The cultures of drinking and fieldwork have previously been identified as masculinist settings in geography (Rose, 1993 68; Maguire, 1998), with much work being done to break this down (Bracken and Mawdsley, 2004). After enough time, 'everyday' discrimination and/or exploitation recalibrates a department's ethos and culture towards gendered roles and career progression, especially in small departments or those with low staff turnover. They are difficult to counter, except through sustained cultural change – while an individual rebuke for an 'unintended insult' or a single complaint can gain little traction, sustained collective responses and

initiatives such as establishing a network of LGBTQ allies with a commitment to calling out inappropriate behaviour can be effective.

Flexibility, caring and taking breaks

Issues around work-life balance were discussed extensively by respondents, especially the ways in which caring responsibilities of different types overlapped or limited work opportunities and ultimately impacted careers, highlighting and reinforcing what Al James has referred to as "the unavoidably gendered everyday geographies of work-life" (James 2018, 177).

Two-fifths of survey respondents reported caring for children, parents, partner, siblings or friends, and some of these were complex caring relationships with overlapping responsibilities (e.g. children-partner, children-parents). These situations were reported across career stages; however, early-career employees are in highly precarious positions and are dependent on the culture of a department and its approach to collegiality in terms of how it shares burdens across staff. Respondents reported significant short and long-term effects of picking up additional workload, the challenges of recalibrating on return from a career break, and the toll that caring responsibilities place on personal life and networks.

In the UK employees have a statutory right to paid maternity leave (and co-parents the right to two weeks parental leave). However, in the case of pregnancy and being a parent, balancing the demands of being a carer and having an academic career raises an unequally gendered set of issues (Crang, 2003). Women must have secure employment in order to secure those rights:

> "I feel that as a woman with the hope of starting a family in the not too distant future, that it is almost impossible to start my career in academia. Very few permanent positions are available, particularly at the research level, and I want

to secure a permanent position where I am entitled to maternity leave before I start a family." *Female 23 (Under 25 years)*

While there have been improvements in work practices around maternity leave compared with the assumption of resignation on pregnancy which persisted into the 1970s (Maddrell 2009), departments, and especially line managers and heads of departments, are inconsistent in how such statutory leave is managed – and perceived. Maternity leave creates a source of tension within departments where appropriate cover for leave is not provided:

"There is a lot of tension around perceived benefits of those who take maternity leave. Young, male and childless have to take on more work in order that maternity leavers can have their leave. The university has capitalized on their leaving by not hiring leave staff, and as such the workloads increase for everyone else." *Male 243 (35-44 years)*

Whether a legal right or policy exists and how it is implemented are two quite different things, with implications for all those involved. While some institutions and managers see the persuasive evidence of poor work-life balance [WLB] potentially leading to "increased stress, reduced psychological well-being, deteriorating familial relationships and ongoing gendered labour market inequality" and try to make the system work for mutual benefit, many other managers or employers see it as "unfairly privileging a small subset of their workforce… [and] any workers who do make use of WLB arrangements are often perceived negatively as less committed and adversely affecting the firm", leading to individuals feeling trapped or pushed out by an inflexible system (James 2018, 177 and broader discussion in Chapter Three).

Many women respondents commented on the apparent impossibility of combining a family life with an academic career, but men did not, suggesting only

women anticipate having to make career sacrifices when becoming a parent *or* as a parent setting out on an academic career, as the following response illustrates:

> "I rather doubt - when I eventually finish my PhD - that the university structure/culture will be flexible enough to welcome a mature researcher with complex childcare responsibilities onto its books." *Female 8 (35-44 years)*

Shared parental responsibilities ought to mitigate gender inequalities associated with the career impact of child-rearing, but survey participants reported huge local variation in attitudes to parents' requests for seminars and meetings within office hours, or flexible hours to accommodate the school run, ranging from selective valorisation of fathers' childcare to the rejection of requests for flexible working hours:

> "Asked for flexible working - e.g. start a bit later to enable taking children to school. Was denied as not female and not seen as carer!" *Male 285 (35-44 years)*

Such discrepancies in policy and/or ethos result in varying overt and covert strategies on the part of parents managing their combined work and child-caring responsibilities.

Another issue evidenced in the survey was the impact of caring responsibilities for non-infant children, parents and/or spouses can occur at any career stage, for which there is little or no formal mechanism for support. Once more, while women are most likely to carry the 'double care burden' of the simultaneous needs of children and family elders in mid-life, some men also share those caring responsibilities, as evidenced in the following quotes and strategies. These reflective voices remind us of the burden of caring for a senior relative at any stage across one's career.

> "Currently working part-time because of the health of my parents and husband" *Female 220 (55-64 years)*

> "Very exhausting responsibilities for elderly members of the family [which] almost brought me to a complete nervous breakdown. [...] How I got through teaching, admin… and all of that in the worst months is beyond my comprehension. I never took a day off sick in my whole career (contrary to the advice of my GP)." *Male 116 (65 years and over)*

This highlights issues for and performance pressures on mid-career faculty staff at a time when they might expect to consolidate their career take on extra responsibility etc... Whatever the career stage, the support of colleagues at these critical moments, when careers (and especially career transitions) intersect with personal crisis or challenges, is integral to the survival of those 'in the thick of it', but also to their career development. The significance of peer support and mentoring is discussed in the next section.

Peer support and mentoring

Survey respondents reported that mentors played a key role in encouraging and inspiring them, especially at 'crossroads' and key decision-making points; "Being mentored by senior scholars has been very important indeed" *(Male 13, 26-34 years).* The key decision-making points cited in responses included the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate/PhD study, the decision to enter an academic career, securing first permanent academic jobs, and the transition from senior lecturer to professor. Mentors need not necessarily be more senior; more than half of respondents got inspiration or encouragement or ideas from peers or colleagues, reinforcing the power of collective tactics encouraged by Bearman et al (2016) in challenging the precarity or isolation of the early-career stage.

The most highly commended mentors, however, demonstrated & inspired work/life balance, praxis and scholarship. For one early-career scholar her mentors were:

> *"*Encouraging, inspiring, friendly and approachable - made me feel confident in my work. Took time to engage with my work, to offer critical feedback to enable me to improve the quality of my work." *Female 64 (26-34 years)*

For another, the nature of the mentor role changed as her academic career advanced:

> "Now my role models are those academic women (primarily) who are active as researchers and thinkers and who are interested in articulating universities as potentially transformative places, who recognize that universities are political places and who act on that level." *Female 48, (35-44 years)*

Survey respondents also reported a range of productive relationships with guides and mentors with career defining outcomes, particularly when reflecting back on their early-careers:

> "I didn't think about this consciously at the time. As a student, motivated and interested in thinking independently, I didn't seek out a formal 'mentor'. But I was in contact with other graduate students or young professors who were very encouraging and who taught courses that engaged with subjects on a conceptual level. I was interested in thinking more critically, and I was interested in 'theory' and that was not discouraged by any of my professors. In terms of role models that I felt were more like me, I was in a geography department that had one very capable woman professor (although at the time, she was probably not that senior) and quite a few woman graduate students, so I could see other young women who had done or were doing what I decided I wanted to." *Female 47, (55- 64 years)*

Such testimony reminds us that encouragement can come from multiple sources, and a mentor might not always be identified formally but attributed with influence in retrospect. For some early-career respondents, mentors were fundamental to their continuation in academia, sometimes positively influencing their research and teaching but in other contexts offering support by reducing the harm that a toxic environment caused. This was reported by one respondent, who noted "supportive mentors have significantly reduced the impact" of discrimination and bullying *(Female 3, under 25 years).*

For those who offered mentoring, they spoke of the importance of giving time because they believed this to be important to the future success of others:

> "While I do not feel, recently, (last 13 years) that being a woman has affected my career, I can see more junior women colleagues in other departments where this has been the case. I now use my position to campaign for equal ops across the university (e.g. run promotions workshops for women)." *(Female 114, 55-64 years).*

As more institutions put formal mentoring schemes into place, it is important that these interactions go beyond a tick box exercise which potentially undermines the enormous value that meaningful mentoring and career coaching can bring, and that they should be properly resourced. Several of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) research and working groups now offer mentoring, networking or career development events (RGS-IBG 2018), and Harriet Hawkins (2018) has advocated for mentoring and academic caring as feminist practice.

The 'right' sort of work for promotion

Once on an early-career path, working toward promotion is an anticipated part of the UK academic career. Our respondents reported the challenges that accompanied them in

the search for career progression. Those who were starting their career highlighted the challenges of being able to advance their status owing to the number of short-term contracts and the number of years it takes to be considered ready for promotion. For example, one respondent noted:

> "Too early in my career to have sought promotion. Always been on relatively short contracts until now (5 years on current contract)" *(Male 32, 26-34 years)*

A woman in a similar position, at an earlier stage of her career reported her experience more positively:

> "I have been a RF [Research Fellow] for nearly 4 years and felt that I was doing the job of a SRF [Senior Research Fellow] anyway so sought promotion. I was also encouraged by my head of centre and mentor to apply" *(Female 55, 26-34 years)*

It is telling, however, to explore the experience of a female in a similar research fellow job, mid-career, with parenting responsibilities:

> "I've been on several three-year contracts so the chances for promotion above my 'level' are difficult. I became an increasingly expensive post-doc." *(Female 86, 35-44 years)*

In this case, being 'stuck' at their grade resulted in potential employment precarity as a result of their higher wage costs in a short term contract research environment. This highlights the challenge of career progression for scholars who stay in a research-only role on contract basis. A search for progression or secure employment might also mean a move out of geography altogether, as noted by the Economic Geography Research Group in its recent analysis of faculty migration by economic geographers; "Gaining an academic job in a [Business & Management] school, while not being first choice and maybe feeling a little alien at first, may be highly preferable to not being in a position at

all" (James, Bradshaw, Coe and Faulconbridge 2018). Geography is a permeable discipline and many researchers and teachers possess transferable knowledge and skills welcomed in cognate departments. Likewise, the limited number of secure posts prompts colleagues to consider using their skills in non-academic applied arena such as industry, government and the third Sector.

Many respondents reflected on their career progression at different stages, providing further insight into the challenges experienced by early-career colleagues. Misra et al (2011) suggest that women juggle more varied obligations, taking on a higher proportion of pastoral duties that are less likely to lead directly to promotion (also see Maddrell 2009), while Angervall et al (2015) suggest that the research careers of men may even be advanced by women's allocation to this work. This was evident in our survey data too; for example this early-career female noted how she – as the only woman – undertook emotional labour for both students and colleagues:

> "I do more of the pastoral work in my department (where I am the only woman). I also do all of the mediating between colleagues when there are disagreements" *(Female 244, 26-34 years).*

Likewise, women reported being recognised as good colleagues and given significant responsibilities but being overlooked for promotion:

> "I attribute the outcomes of my promotion frustration to my departmental management team - they have a very problematic track record with promotion... I am told I am great staff member etc. but this is not rewarded... It's worth mentioning some inequalities (gendered sadly) in promotion decisions: a younger male colleague was promoted ahead of me - he had in his CV 8 journal articles (5 of which were co-authored) and 1 book chapter. I had a book, 12 articles and 6 chapters (all except 2 single authored) - we had similar admin

roles (both senior) - to me this is discrimination and I told them so - it got me nowhere and left me exceedingly unhappy... I also have been managing (I am programme director) colleagues who are senior to me but are not 'trusted' with admin jobs!" *Female 38, (35-44 years)*

Administration was noted as an asset in cases for promotion, but securing administrative roles was associated with discrimination:

"Administrative responsibilities tend to be passed to males because they are linked to promotions and also to avoid risk of continuity problems if a female goes on maternity leave (2 examples of this in my own department in the last 12 months)." *(Female 176, 35-44 years)*

A similar response came from a male in the same age range noting his own success in achieving promotion at an early-career stage:

"In terms of getting the promotions, it was a mix of taking on big admin loads (esp. from Lecturer to SL) and (especially) winning big research awards (it is the money that counts most!)" *(Male 186, 35-44 years)*

Our analysis suggests there is an alchemy to getting promotion with each person reporting slightly different experience of the process as well as processes varying across departments and universities. Indeed, one respondent pushed back against this suggesting they "Strongly believe that promotion is something that should be offered not sought if you are following the agreed path." *(Male 249, 35-44 years).* Clear promotion criteria and processes are central to equality. As the Athena Swan agenda and networks promote and share good promotion practice in institutions, from improving job descriptions and promotion criteria to the use of more inclusive promotion panels, this is a moment of opportunity for colleagues in those universities

seeking to attain and retain gender equality awards. However, for many of our respondents the following reflection on limited career progression through early and mid-career will resonate more soundly, and offers a rather depressing edge to this discussion of discrimination around promotion:

> "Being female hindered, especially early on. In my first job, I was often treated as helpless and less able. Mid-career I fought battles that should not have been necessary over maternity leave, working part time, RAE submission, etc. Undoubtedly I didn't have the same leg ups male colleagues have had, and had to achieve more for promotion. Petty sexism from petty colleagues throughout. Now as a professor there is still pressure to prove yourself as a woman, but it doesn't worry me. I don't think being female is any kind of advantage, although there is a myth now circulating that it is easier. You still have to be better than the average man at the same career level." *Female 202 (35-44 years)*

Conclusion: Change that makes a difference

While new opportunities have emerged in the last twenty years for early-career academics in the UK, such as specific research council awards for early-career scholars, these are offset by the growth of short-term and fractional appointments and associated personal and professional precarity. This survey of geographers in the UK university sector demonstrates that whilst the effects of these changes in the sector are not limited to women, nor those in the early-career stage, they are nonetheless disproportionately borne by early-career women, and particularly by those womenfrom minorities who often face compound intersectional bias and barriers.

In recent years the Athena Swan and Race Equality Charter Mark and Stonewall awards are all having a significant impact in raising and addressing equality issues in

those UK departments and universities engaging with the scheme. However, departments and universities (whether pursuing these awards or not) need to mainstream the equality agenda and make a sustained commitment to strategies to address inequalities at each career stage.

We have previously argued that Heads of Departments and other senior colleagues "have a particular responsibility in leading change to address gender inequalities and the direct and indirect discrimination that is frequently associated with such inequalities" (Maddrell et al 2016, 7). Heads of Departments, Schools or Faculty may not be able to change the wider institutional systems of the neo-liberalised university sector, including research and teaching metrics, but as de facto employers and line managers, they have a responsibility for the culture and practices within their ambit. Likewise, line managers, whether Heads of Department or research project leaders have a responsibility to work with early-career staff to support their personal professional development, such as due credit in co-authorship, formal appointment of mentors, proportional access to institutional funds and training opportunities, representation within Department, School or Faculty bodies, access to promotion-friendly roles.

Mutual respect and responsive support systems offer the best way to cultivate the talent and resource which early-career colleagues represent to individual institutions and the wider discipline. One way to create greater awareness of women's geographical work within the wider discipline is to avoid reiterating a largely masculine 'canon' in research and teaching. Conscientious citation practices encourage the strategic amplification of women's voices (Mott and Cockayne 2017), and this, coupled with critical *engagement* with women's work does much to normalise women as

authoritative producers of geographical knowledge and leaders within their fields (Maddrell 2009; 2015).

Our analysis of career progression in the UK suggested the following changes make a difference.

(1) During the early-career stage, accessing posts of a reasonable duration, with clear expectations that are not changed whilst in post are important to a feeling of security.

(2) Those appointed to their first teaching-research posts should expect support from a designated mentor or 'buddy' and some remission of teaching load and other expectations in the first year.

(3) Support, encouragement and mentoring from senior colleagues and peers is also important during key transitions and promotions. Respondents highlighted the importance of receiving positive encouragement and fair treatment from mentors, Heads of Department and those supporting applications for jobs or promotion.

(4) The Departmental culture, and the ethos and sensitivity to factors affecting [women's] progression is of particular importance when building positive working environments. Leaders within the department play a crucial role in this, but collective intolerance of so-called 'micro' aggressions, discriminations, exploitations can be a powerful force for change.

(5) Heads of departments need to lead on making statutory leave a fair process, both for those taking maternity and paternity leave, and those providing cover. Too many of our respondents reported 'battles' around the maternity leave arrangements, sub-optimal arrangements for return to work, and the impact of caring obligations of all types on the often-assumed ability to work 'out of hours' or on mid-career progression.

(6) Providing support for flexible working options and/or better recognition of caring responsibilities (of all kinds, not just children) is linked to early-career progression, alongside the appropriate management of cover for statutory leave.
(7) The fair distribution of pastoral and administrative tasks in workload allocation, including those roles most likely to accrue credit in relation to promotion criteria.

Ultimately, whether relating to statutory parental leave or wider equality and diversity agenda, institutional policies are only as good as their enactment by leaders. This highlights the importance of the attitude and leadership of Heads of Departments and other senior staff in cultivating an enabling workplace which allows all colleagues opportunities to flourish. However, changes in institutional 'culture' and policy don't alter fact of everyday lived experience. The survey responses highlight the contradictions between what individuals were entitled to, and what they received in practice. This highlights the importance, in a time of metric-centred agenda, of the ongoing collection and sharing of qualitative and quantitative data such as that discussed here, facilitating collective comparison, understanding and responses.

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