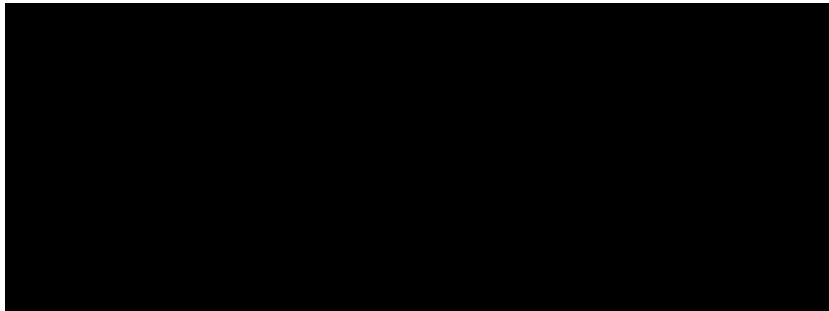


# Producing Knowledge, Reproducing Gender

## Irish Independent, August 2020



IRISH INDEPENDENT Saturday, August 15, 2020

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# The Week

## 'Ireland of equals' out of reach for women judging by Varadkar's self-serving tweets

**Martina Devlin**

**W**HIS PILL speculation about a reconfigured world after the pandemic can be heard. Granted, it would make worthwhile use of a crisis - but let's not hold our breath, judging by the bounce-back to business as usual following the 2008 economic collapse.

Remember when hypermasculinity in the financial sector, along with groupthink and a lack of oversight, led the State its sovereignty temporarily? Shockwaves led to an expectation that workplace dynamics would be shaken up, but change has been slight.

Middle-class men who don't even recognise their own privileged position continue to rule the roost. Leo Varadkar, the second most powerful politician in the State, this week tried to position himself and Barry Ward a sealer and barrister, as part of a marginalised group because they are male and middle class.

Indeed, I did a double take too. It suggests a blind spot about one's own advantages in life, to say the least.

The Taoiseach, by the way, isn't known for promoting women - as Taoiseach, he appointed fewer women to junior ministries than Enda Kenny, and just four women to senior Cabinet portfolios.

Despite social transformation in other areas of life, workplace attitudes are slow to change, with some downright hostile to women. Women are accustomed to having their authority questioned. Where a man is regarded as confident, a woman is represented as aggressive.

Presenteeism is a factor in some jobs, with long hours the norm and an expectation people will make themselves constantly available. Long hours don't necessarily make employees more productive, of course. But the tradition militates against women who may have caregiver roles outside work - caring work tends to be feminised in households.

Society in general profits by it, but women carry the lion's share of the burden.

The deep-structured gender division... that almost imperceptibly frame our institutions, processes and practices remain largely intact, according to *Producing Knowledge, Reproducing Gender*, an important collection of well-researched



essays for UCD Press, edited by Pauline Cullen and Mary P Corcoran of Maynooth University.

The editors point to the persistence of a 'power dynamic in the workplace that consistently benefits men at the expense of women' and note the 'pink collar ghetto' of dead-end low income jobs where women workers cluster. James Connolly's famous observation - behind every poor man is a poorer woman - hasn't dated.

The book notes Ireland is home to global giants such as Facebook, and educates a high number of computer programmers by European standards. But it says the information and communication technology workplace is gender segregated, with the more prestigious programming jobs dominated by men while women are likelier to be in business operations and community management.

In the wealth creating investment management sector, the lack of change post-crash is striking. A 2015 study of 56 companies worldwide found four in five fund managers were male. In Ireland, it was eight in nine.

In science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM subjects, girls outperform boys at secondary level but that's reversed at third level education. In 2016, women comprised only 24pc of top academic staff in the EU - and just 15pc in science and engineering.

Directors of big budget films in Hollywood are exclusively male. Books written by women receive less review attention

**A girl yawns between lip service about gender equality and initiatives to drive improvements**

than books by men. Women national newspaper editors are thin on the ground. In media, the 'important' political and economic stories tend to be reported by male journalists, while women are judged towards features and lifestyle.

Granted, some women currently hold down high-profile jobs once associated with men. Women heading up organisations include Francesca McDonough at Bank of Ireland, Fionn Muldoon in insurance company FBD, Patricia King in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Siobhán Talbot at Galena.

Chaire Ladus is director of public prosecutions. Mary Lou McDonald is both president of Sinn Féin and leader of the Opposition. RTE has a female director general in Dax Ferbera and chair in Moya Doherty. But the visibility of individual high-achievers gives an unrepresentative picture overall.

Research shows women adapt to the prevailing culture in ways which don't disrupt it. Some become 'pseudo males' to succeed, according to *Producing Knowledge, Reproducing Gender* - reluctant to take maternity leave or ask for flexible working - while others feel forced out of their jobs because of the culture.

Some more sideways and don't pursue promotion, partly to accommodate motherhood and career roles. When they do seek promotion, they can be dismissed as either 'women in waiting' or past it. The pay gap is a live issue.

Significantly, women TDs still only

account for 22pc of the Oireachtas. There has been no female taoiseach in more than a century.

Change in politics, as elsewhere, needs to be not just structural but cultural - although any cultural shift is a distant prospect judging by that dark, self-serving tweet from Mr Varadkar. He posted: 'If you are white, male or even worse middle-class, Sinn Féin doesn't want you. So much for an 'Ireland of equals.'

This is Trumpery idiom - the US president is master of such divisive rhetoric. The matter arose because of a disagreement a week and a half earlier between senators Lynn Boylan and Barry Ward about residential tenancies legislation. Senator Boylan was making a valid point about how those who are privileged experience the law differently to others relegated to the periphery.

It mystified why the Taoiseach was scolding through old tweets to score points with a pandemic in full swing. In any event, white, middle-class men are hardly the most exploited, demoralised or disadvantaged group in Irish life. Rather, they are overrepresented among key decision makers and opinion formers.

Clearly, there is resistance to change. Notably from some - not all - white, middle-class men. And if white, middle-class women must push beyonds uphill to succeed, how daunting is it for women of colour, Traveller women, migrant women, women with disabilities and so on?

Change hasn't yet been delivered because a gulf yawns between lip service about gender equality and the implementation of initiatives to drive improvements. But maintaining the status quo does a disservice to society in the round - after all, the community flourishes when diversity is encouraged in no circumstances is unbreeding healthy.

An interesting chapter contributed by Caitriona Crowe, former head of special projects at the National Archives, mentions the silenced voices of women in Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes - she says some religious orders have not made archive material readily available. That refers to the past - but there are silenced voices today.

Finally, a clever, able woman in the shape of Kamala Harris is a contender for the US vice presidency - the first time a woman of colour has joined a US presidential ticket. Joe Biden chose well in his men interests but also in women's.

*Producing Knowledge, Reproducing Gender: Power, Production and Practice in Contemporary Ireland*, edited by Pauline Cullen and Mary P Corcoran, has just been published by University College Dublin Press.

