

## Experiencing gender regimes

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## Experiencing gender regimes: Accounts of women professors in Mexico, the UK and Sweden

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This article investigates differences between statistics on gender equality in Mexico, the UK and Sweden, and similarities in women professors' career experiences in these countries. We use Acker's (2006; 2009) inequality regime framework, focusing on gender, to explore our data, and argue that similarities in women professors' lived experiences are related to an image of the ideal academic. This ideal type is produced in the interplay of the university gender regime and other gender regimes, and reproduced through the process of structuration: signification, domination and legitimation. We suggest that the struggle over legitimation can also be a trigger for change.

Keywords: gender regimes, academia, the ideal academic, structuration

*When I was interviewed to be Reader, every academic on my readership panel was male. They asked me what it took to succeed. I'm afraid by the time I got out of that meeting my answer would have been, "a sex change".* (Professor in the UK; 25% women professors)

*Men are given more privileges than women. The presence of more men creates this privilege. In the case of Dr Alma [the Dean], in the time since she came here, her appointment has represented a grain of rice, one chickpea in the pound. Normally it is men who get these positions.* (Professor in Mexico; 22% women professors in the National System of Researchers)

*Men are often promoted on potential - not on their achievement but on potential, whereas women are sometimes not even promoted on achievement.* (Professor in Sweden; 28% women professors)

The women who made these statements are professors based in public universities in the UK, Mexico and Sweden. In gender equality league tables, Sweden, the UK and Mexico are far apart: respectively standing at 3<sup>rd</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> in the World Economic Forum 2018 Global Gender Gap index. Underpinning these rankings are different economic, political and economic regimes. However, the figures on women in higher education and women's accounts of their experiences in universities contain notable similarities. We use a gender regime framework (Acker, 2006; 2009;) to compare the career accounts of women

professors in these three countries, providing new insights into forces for inertia which work to reproduce existing arrangements.

Decades of research into academic workplaces have revealed the persistence of gender inequality, manifest through structural arrangements and members' everyday practices. The 'gender regime' (Walby 2004) is an analytical construct for understanding how gender inequality is produced, sustained and reproduced. Acker's (2006; 2009) concept of 'inequality regimes' elucidates organisations' inequality-producing practices and processes, providing a framework for examining the complex mixture of structural, cultural and processual elements.

Although there has been considerable research into gender and inequality regimes, most is based in the global north (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). With some exceptions (Zippell, 2018), there is little research that compares the experiences of women academics based in more economically developed countries in the global north with those in less economically developed countries in the global south. This means that we have limited understanding of how cultural, social and economic arrangements interact with Higher Education institutions to produce particular outcomes for those working in this sector.

This paper is based on data generated in interviews with women professors in the UK, Mexico and Sweden. We focus on gender for two reasons. First, in all three countries, statistics with respect to gender are stark and worthy of interrogation in their own right. Second, whilst we recognise the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, gender and other social categories, a study of how these intersect in three different national/cultural contexts would quickly become unwieldy. That said, we appreciate that gender is not an essential category and that it does not operate in isolation.

In what follows we briefly summarise the context of higher education in the UK, Mexico and Sweden. Next, we review the literature on gender and academic labour and discuss the relevance of gender regimes to our analysis. We then describe our methodological approach. Our findings compare the three contexts, focusing on the shape and degree of gender-based inequality and the processes through which this is produced and reproduced. Our paper culminates in two contributions. First, we develop Acker's concept of the ideal worker in an academic context. Second, we show that existing arrangements are reproduced through processes of legitimation, signification and domination, and we speculate on potential triggers for change in the different contexts.

## **National Context**

### **Table 1 here**

The table above provides an overview of the national contexts for this research. The Gender Inequality ranking is derived from four sub-scales. First, economic participation and opportunity incorporates labour market participation, remuneration and advancement. Second, educational attainment captures access to education through ratios of women to men in primary, secondary and tertiary-level education. The third sub-scale, health and survival, considers the differences between women's and men's health and life expectancy. The fourth is political empowerment, measuring the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making. As the table shows, Sweden ranks highest on gender equality in economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. The UK ranks best with regard to equality in educational attainment and Mexico ranks highest on health and survival.

Looking at employment, the UK, Mexico and Sweden all have non-discrimination laws and representation of women at senior levels in the three countries has improved. However, in

Mexico in particular this is not translated into representation at Board level. Mexico also has the highest gender pay gap. All three countries offer parental support and government subsidized childcare, though the nature of the provision varies, with Sweden offering the most. Women in Mexico undertake a far higher proportion of unpaid work than their counterparts in the UK or Sweden, suggesting a more traditional approach towards gender roles.

### **Gender inequality in higher education**

The under-representation of women at senior levels in academia is well known and enduring (Acker & Armenti, 2004, Bagilhole, 2002; Fagan & Teasdale, 2020; Ozbilgin & Healy). Various explanations have been posited, including the demanding nature of the job which leaves little time for child care (Huppertz et al., 2019; Pacheco, 2017), the requirement for international mobility (Leemann, 2010), formal structures which disadvantage women (Bilimoria et al 2014) and informal processes which create a 'chilly environment' (Britton, 2017).

Acker's concept of inequality regimes captures the dense and multi-layered networks of structural, cultural and processual dimensions underpinning gender inequality. Acker identifies six broad characteristics of inequality regimes. The first is the basis of inequality, typically linked to gender, class and race. Whilst we agree that these bases intersect, we focus here on gender (Acker, 2006: 444). Acker's second characteristic is the degree and shape of inequality: the steepness of the hierarchy, where people are grouped and the power differences between these levels; and disparities in remuneration (Walby, 2004).

The third component is the underpinning organizing processes that produce inequality. Existing research on gender disparities in academia has highlighted the organisation of academic work (O'Brien & Hapgood, 2012; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014); career trajectories (Healy, Ozbilgin & Aliefendioglu, 2005; Seierstad & Healy, 2012); recruitment and promotion (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012); wages (Pells, 2018); and informal, everyday interactions (Duberley & Cohen, 2010).

Acker's last three components are more abstract. The fourth is the visibility and awareness of inequalities, and fifth is their perceived legitimacy, including agreed notions of merit and success. In academia, scholars argue that these widely accepted definitions are based on the patterns, rhythms and expectations of stereotypical men's lives against which women do not always measure up (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Tatli Ozturk and Woo, 2017). Finally, Acker highlights mechanisms of control and compliance - the organisational systems that prevent change.

It is important to recognise the relevance of context and the link between workplace regimes and wider society (Frenkel, 2008; Tatli et al, 2017). However, there is a dearth of research which compares experiences of women academics in the global north and south. Given the WEF Gender Equality figures and the economic, social and political regimes that give rise to them, we might expect the lived experiences of women academics in Mexico, the UK and Sweden to be significantly different. However, the quotes at the start of this article suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Seierstad and Healy's (2012) research into women academics in Sweden, and Healy and colleagues' (2005) in Turkey shed light on these counter-intuitive findings.

Healy et al examine Turkish women's low rate of labour market participation and their simultaneous success in academia. They describe a sequence of state-wide reform programmes based on an ideology of equality that led to women's increased participation in higher education. However, they also explain how subsequent changes in Turkish political, social and economic arrangements, together with traditional ideologies of the family, posed a challenge to their advancement in other sectors.

Seierstad and Healy's (2012) research on gender and academia in Scandinavia offers further insights. Notwithstanding Scandinavia's strong position in international rankings, the proportion of women professors in Sweden, Norway and Denmark lags behind Turkey. In spite of those countries' explicit goal of fostering equality, their findings reveal the persistence of a gendered division of domestic labour, with associated notions of worth and value. In their conclusion, they highlight the 'resilience' of organisational inequality regimes in spite of legislation and a strong state infrastructure (Seierstad & Healy, 2012).

Through our examination of women academics' careers in Mexico, the UK and Sweden, we offer new insights into how gender inequality is perpetuated in academia and consider where seeds of change may lie in these different contexts.

## **Research design**

Our study is based on in-depth interviews with 26 women professors from public, research-oriented universities in the UK, Mexico and Sweden. We focus on one well-established university in each country. These universities have similar structures, with academic disciplines grouped into broad, discipline-based entities, e.g. Engineering, Natural Sciences, Humanities. In the UK and Swedish universities these are referred to as Faculties, while in Mexico they are Centres. Our sample consists of eight respondents in Mexico and Sweden and 11 in the UK. Because academic careers vary between disciplines, in all three universities we interviewed at least one professor in each faculty/centre, although we acknowledge that within these broad groupings there is significant diversity.

The terminology for academic positions is not consistent across contexts: in some 'professor' refers to an academic (often teaching) role, while in others it signifies seniority and/or tenure. Our focus in this study is on senior women academics who have secured promotion based on, among other things, their research profiles. We are using the term 'professor' throughout the paper, but readers should be mindful of this difference

We focused on senior women for two reasons. First, by examining the experiences of women academics in Mexico, Sweden and UK we sought to address limitations in the literature which has, by and large, investigated women in single countries in the global north. Given the inherent diversity of our sample, focusing on one hierarchical level provided a basis for comparison. Second, senior people tend to have long career histories and, importantly for issues of in/equality, have been through several rounds of promotion. Therefore, they are able to provide rich descriptions of how the elements of Acker's framework combine over time. We do appreciate, however, that by focusing on those who have manifestly been successful, we may have missed insights from those who have experienced less hierarchical success.

The three authors are all women professors: two are based in the UK and one in Mexico. Thus, we are positioned alongside our respondents. Well aware of the challenges of being 'insiders', throughout our analysis we questioned our own and each other's interpretations in the spirit of on-going reflexive enquiry (Cunliffe, 2003).

We used our personal contacts and a snowballing process to generate a purposeful sample (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Consistent with BSA ethical guidance, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and what participation would involve. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of respondents and organisations.

**Table 2 here**

Our research proceeds from an interpretive perspective, based on the idea of organizational worlds as socially constructed, and individuals as 'knowledgeable agents' (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012: 17). In semi-structured interviews, we asked respondents to recount their career stories and how gender played out in their settings, covering the key constituents of Acker's gender regimes, whilst leaving space for them to introduce their own concerns.

With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Mexican interviews conducted in Spanish were translated by a native British speaker and then checked by a native Spanish speaker. Swedish participants were interviewed in English. The analytical approach was hybrid (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Analysis began using the gender regimes framework as an initial template, which was further developed as new insights emerged. Our analysis, which is depicted in table three, followed three steps (Gioia et al, 2012). The first step was descriptive coding in which the authors discussed emergent codes authors to ensure consistency and reliability. During the second stage we moved between further analysis and the literature to elicit our working themes. This process culminated in the third step, synthesising the second order themes into aggregate dimensions. These form the basis of the discussion.

### **Table 3 here**

#### **Patterns of inequality**

Respondents spoke about the distribution of women and men in their organisations and how work was organised. In the first section we present our findings on the shape and degree of inequality, and then move on to processes that produce these arrangements. Significantly, few respondents, particularly in the UK and Mexico, questioned the apparent inevitability of these patterns.

#### *Shape and degree of inequality*

In all three countries, formal positions of power were unequally distributed between men and women, with a concentration of men in the most senior positions and women in the least. This uneven distribution was most acute in Sciences and Engineering.

Respondents explained that these patterns echoed those in professional bodies and associations. This was most striking and most entrenched in Mexico where academic success was directly related to membership of the prestigious National Research System (SIN). Admission to SIN is based on external evaluation of an academic's research portfolio and professional development every four years. High quality publications are central to a positive evaluation, and so are powerful networks. Respondents explained that for women, it is not easy to be accepted and remain in the SIN. Anita recounted:

There are statistics showing that most of the members of SIN are men. My ex-husband [an academic] always told me 'I'm just doing my job and you do the rest, you know, you've got to be a researcher... and you take care of the kids' (Mexico, Biology).

Given that membership of SIN is a symbol of excellence and is largely populated by men, the excellent academic comes to be associated with maleness. Anita and other Mexican respondents explained that in this setting, women have to fight for their legitimacy. Anita also highlights the inevitability of gendered domestic arrangements. Whereas her husband pursued his research unfettered, she had to fit hers in around other responsibilities. This created a vicious circle which reinforced the apparent rationality of the domestic division of labour and posed a challenge to Anita's academic success. Failing to gain acceptance in SIN cast doubt on her academic credibility, and the spiral continued.

While the UK does not have an equivalent to the Mexican SIN, it does have the Research Excellence Framework. UK women may not face exactly the same patterns of exclusion as their Mexican counterparts; however the REF has been critiqued as gendered (Davies, Yarrow & Syed, 2020; Hand, 2017). There was a consensus amongst UK respondents that developing a strong research portfolio was more straight forward for men because the 'rules of the academic game' were better suited to men's lives. They saw the REF as inculcating a highly competitive culture that did not sit comfortably with how many women (and arguably some men) wanted to work. Isla highlighted a *'do or die, very aggressive, masculine approach and that's justified on the basis of we're an elite university and that's how it is'*.

Life could be precarious for the women who made it to the top of their university's management structures. In Jenny's words:

The high levels of visibility of the few senior women makes them targets for criticism. The minute a woman gets in power, if she does one thing that people don't like suddenly it's like, 'See, we can't have a woman in charge,' where men have been screwing up since the dawn of time (UK, Life Sciences).

Jenny's quote highlights senior women's lack of legitimacy. Women do access senior positions, but they are in the spotlight and many feel unwelcome.

This sense of precarity was less apparent in the Swedish data. Respondents pointed to the same numerical disparities and some explained that these were a historical legacy. However, they described these patterns with more surprise than their Mexican and UK counterparts. Amanda explains:

We speak about ourselves and quantitatively we come out very much as an equal country ... But if you look at our management and look at the Deans of the Faculties we have two females [out of 7] and it's for the two smallest.... (Sweden, Geography).

Underpinning these data is the concept of homosociality, which has been used to describe men's preference for other men and the practices by which men promote men, thus ensuring that male dominance is maintained (Dressel et al 1994; Holgersson 2013). These practices are embedded in notions of legitimacy and processes of inclusion and exclusion, and emerged as central to our analysis. This will be further illustrated in the next section.

#### *Organizing processes that produce inequality*

Acker highlights the importance of formal and informal practices, from well-established policies to casual gatherings and serendipitous conversations, in creating and sustaining inequality. Our data include examples from across that spectrum. For the sake of parsimony, we are highlighting three key issues: promotion; the impact of domestic roles and responsibilities; and informal networks. However, the lines between these spheres are blurry and in practice they are connected.

#### Promotion

Respondents agreed that, officially, to be promoted to professor academics should excel across *'all the pillars: research, teaching and leadership'*. Certain disciplines also emphasised impact outside of academia, and in some the balance of these activities varied. However, the perception was that in a research-oriented university, research mattered most. To succeed in research one needed to be focused, single-minded, highly mobile and well-connected. Our respondents argued these criteria are more closely aligned with men's lives than women's and that to progress, women need to be even better than men:

It's absolutely obvious, so I feel as a woman scientist I have to be ten times as good as a man to get to where they get to (Esther, UK, Geography).

Women's competence is not judged by the same criteria as men's (Rahel, Mexico, Economics & Management).

They made the regulations harsher, like you were expected to do more stuff and bring in more money (Astrid, Sweden, Engineering).

Initially we were struck by the similarities in women's stories of promotion. However, there was a subtle difference in how they evaluated the inequalities they faced. In Sweden, respondents explained that gender inequalities in promotion practices were historical, and currently being redressed:

[in the promotion guidelines] there is a paragraph saying that, in terms of heavy underrepresentation of one gender, if it's equal, equal between candidates, you have to give the position to the underrepresented (Barbara, Sweden, Health Sciences).

Several respondents repeated this exact phrasing, indicating a familiarity with the policy that we did not find in UK or Mexican accounts. However, two Swedish respondents described how in practice biases slipped in, as Molly described:

It was a terrible process. They couldn't find the people to peer review it and then I was extremely disappointed at the outcome because there were two positions. I was ranked third and then I felt it was not fair ... I don't know if the people in the Appointments Board felt somehow that this ranking was a bit off, so they opened a third position and I got that (Sweden, Law).

Two notable points arise here. First, there is a sense that the problem was introduced from outside her university, via the peer review process. Second, when her university became aware of the injustice, they rectified it, reinforcing the legitimacy of the policy, and the illegitimacy of gender inequality.

Respondents in the UK explained that the problem was stereotypical ideas of excellence and meritocracy that led to inertia. Esther was told by a senior male colleague on a grant panel that nominating only five women out of 50 on the shortlist was perfectly acceptable '*because we're only looking for merit*'. Respondents highlighted how a discourse of meritocracy was used to support existing arrangements:

It's all meritocratic – in other words, that's a recipe for the status quo. What that means, what meritocratic means is we don't want to change anything we do ... and that's why they keep funding men and also they keep being appointed into this macho, hierarchical, structure (Nellie, UK, Social Sciences).

Similarly, if women were often given low status tasks, it was because that was what they were best at. Amy recounted:

If there's some sort of admin or pastoral role then somebody will immediately come into the head of the senior team who's female and if it's something that might be more responsible it'll always just be 'Oh, that [male] person would be very suitable' (UK, Humanities).

This is important because assuming high status leadership positions is a criterion for promotion to senior positions.



Mexican respondents agreed that the formal promotion processes were clear and did not explicitly discriminate on the basis of gender. However, they were *'blind'* to women's domestic roles and constraints. Furthermore, women described numerous cases where existing policies were simply ignored.

Stereotypical notions of merit and value are a further way in which homosociality acts as a force for stability (Sang et al., 2014). In her research on Swedish managers Holgersson (2013) discusses how competence is defined so that acceptability and suitability criteria match the preferred male candidates. Similarly Van den Brink and Benschop (2011) show how the recruitment of professors in the Netherlands is influenced by processes which underestimate the qualifications of female candidates and overestimate those of men.

#### *Informal networks and interaction processes*

Linked to our discussion above, respondents highlighted the importance of networks with influential others. Eli, from Sweden, explained:

It's about networks and power... And it's the young males, they are playing this game so nicely ... The men go to the sauna and then for a beer ... They get the special attention, and the positions (Sweden, Economics & Management).

Rahel from Mexico agreed:

In the university there are solidarity networks that are very masculine, that combine with other political factors. If you don't belong to a group, you can't advance....so, if you don't have masculine networks, power networks, sorry, mafias, then how do you get on? (Mexico, Economics & Management).

External recognition was highly prized, and those who were *'well-connected'* fared best. Situated outside of homosocial *'old boys'* networks, women needed to prove their competence because they were seen as risks. Those seen as most promotable are those who look most like the people in the network. Such implicit biases disadvantage women.

Significantly, respondents argued that because women were not members of established networks, they were also disadvantaged in funding processes. In UK Patricia's words:

There is this view, 'we can trust that team'. You know, they get away with more than perhaps someone who is an inexperienced group. I think the experienced, trusted teams tend to be led by men because of history and everything else (UK, Life Sciences).

An extreme manifestation of such masculine cultures was sexual harassment and violence. All of the Mexican women spoke of this as endemic in their University and beyond. Although there was more reticence in Swedish and UK accounts, respondents nevertheless described situations where *'after hours'* socialising led to such behaviours, of University non-disclosure agreements used to protect powerful men, and of measures to minimise opportunities for these behaviours to occur, such as the use of glass walls in practice rooms at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. Whilst this is a critical issue that warrants further examination, for the purposes of this paper it is important because in a male dominated sector where career progression is linked to patronage and sponsorship, women seeking to advance can be vulnerable to such transgressions.

On one hand, informal interaction and old boys' networks can be seen as securing existing arrangements. However, informal networks were also seen as potential spaces for change. We have already highlighted how Mexican academics help each other out with childcare,

arrangements which, in the absence of formal policies and facilities, enable women with children to pursue their careers. More widely, respondents from all three countries highlighted grassroots movements such as #MeToo as triggers for change.

Esther, from the UK, also recounted how in a recent funding committee meeting a male colleague had raised the issue of gender balance. She was relieved, *'Thank god for that. I don't have to say it again, and again, and again'*. Notably, it was through the interaction between committee members over time that people began to question the legitimacy of the imbalance. This point was reiterated by Greta in Sweden. Greta was a former Dean (and the only woman Dean) of her University's oldest faculty. She explained that it is only through talk that equality retains its place on the agenda, and that policies become meaningful and normalised.

We interviewed Greta the year after she stepped down as Dean. She expressed disappointment that since that time people had stopped talking about equality, and the Faculty had slipped back into old ways of doing things. This supports Sorensson's (2013: 464) argument that homosociality is an 'unreflexive practice', embedded in organizational structures and cultures, and that gender equality initiatives that do not address these homosocial practices are unlikely to succeed.

#### The impact of domestic roles and responsibilities

Women's roles in the domestic arena loomed large in our data. Respondents agreed that motherhood significantly impeded career progress in research universities because it left women with neither the time nor the flexibility to dedicate themselves to their research. More subtly, respondents explained that judgements were made about mothers that prevented them from full participation in the most influential networks.

However, there were notable differences in the data. In Sweden it appears successful academics can also be parents. Brit explained: *'I don't think any Head of Department or any [senior] person would dare to criticise parents. It would be totally unacceptable'* (Sweden, Humanities). But there was a twist in this story. While several respondents praised senior men for their parental roles, there was not a single example of women being lauded for carrying out their maternal responsibilities.

In most Mexican families caring responsibilities are assumed by women. This is a pattern that permeates Mexican society and cuts across social class. Not only do these roles and responsibilities present practical challenges for mothers who want to advance their research careers, but respondents also spoke of the social stigma facing women who do not conform to these expectations. Respondents explained that in Mexico there is little discussion of men's parental roles. They are considered the breadwinners, free to pursue their careers as they see fit.

In Mexico, neither their university nor SIN acknowledges the significance of women's domestic responsibilities and according to our respondents, there have been few attempts at top down change. In the absence of institutionalised support, women help one another through informal arrangements. There was a difference in the accounts of women based in male or female dominated fields. Alicia felt lucky because in her Pharmacy department, networks of women helped each other to juggle demands of home and work: *'In my case it was always easy, if [my son] got sick, to unofficially have time off ... At least in this department, perhaps because women are in the majority here'* (Mexico, Science & Engineering).

Respondents from the UK highlighted the same practical constraints noted by others, and the importance of having an 'exceptional' partner. What distinguished the UK accounts was a focus on mobility and reputation: it was not only what a person *did*, but how much attention

they drew to themselves. As Dorry said, *'you had to be incredibly good at creating a fanfare around something very tiny'*. Respondents like Jenny explained the difficulty achieving this level of fame if you had children:

All the big, really famous people go to all the conferences. That means you are either a single woman or a woman with a very understanding partner without children or with children who are very understanding, or you're a man (UK, Life Sciences).

UK respondents' concerns about motherhood extended to research grants, explaining that some funding bodies did not look positively on Principle Investigators who had to delay their deliverables as a result of staff being pregnant or taking maternity leave.

Because part of the challenge of motherhood is associated with time, the issue of domestic help is pertinent. There are some significant differences in the data which serve to complicate the distinctions between the three countries depicted above. In Mexico the gendered division of labour is starkest and most deeply entrenched, with few if any formal policies to support women at work or home. However, respondents spoke of a large informal labour market and domestic help is easily available and affordable. Furthermore, extended families were frequently enlisted in childcare. All of our Mexican respondents benefitted from either or both of these arrangements.

In contrast, the UK picture was mixed, with patchy combinations of state funded childcare, workplace provision, expensive private arrangements, and family support. Although women took on the bulk of domestic work, most respondents' partners were involved and some assumed significant domestic responsibilities.

The Swedish data add a different dimension. Respondents explained that because generous parental leave is legally mandated and childcare is subsidised, the expectation is that in a two-parent household, both will work full-time. However, the academic day is long and someone needs to be available out of hours. This task has typically fallen to women, leaving men free to focus on their research. Furthermore, because of Sweden's espoused commitment to equality, domestic help was traditionally seen as a taboo. Several of our Swedish respondents had domestic help, but until fairly recently, they kept it a secret for fear of social condemnation. However, in 2008 the government of the day changed the tax policy which allowed people to employ people in the household. To some extent this has lessened the taboo, and helped to ease a burden borne largely by women. This again is an example of Swedish policy driving social change.

The issue of domestic roles and responsibilities highlights the embedded nature of gender regimes. The regimes at play in Academia and the homosocial processes that support them are influenced by the patriarchal gender regimes of wider society. As we will discuss in the next section, these wider societal gender regimes impact on notions of legitimacy, inclusion and exclusion within academia.

## **Discussion**

Our aim in this article was to try to understand the discrepancy between WEF statistics on gender equality in Mexico, the UK and Sweden, and women professors' career experiences. Based on the data presented, we argue that this is related to a global image of the ideal academic which transcends national cultural contexts (Altbach, Reisburg, Rumbley, 2009), and is produced and reproduced in the interplay of the university gender regime and other gender regimes (sectoral, domestic).

In her 'theory of gendered organizations', Acker (1990) proposes the notion of the 'ideal worker'. In ostensibly gender-neutral organisations defined by the patterns of men's lives,

the male body and men's interests, women, their bodies and their life experiences can never fully conform. It is not a case of *just* not belonging, but rather, of women's presence being perceived as disruptive and disorderly. Acker argues that in such settings, 'the abstract, bodiless worker who occupies the gender-neutral job has no sexuality, no emotions, and does not procreate (p. 151). In a workplace characterised by hegemonic masculinity, the ideal worker is typified by technical competence and a lack of emotion or family demands.

The power of Acker's 'ideal worker' is that it provides a recognisable representation of how elements of a social context work together to define and legitimate how people inhabit that context, the qualities and ways of being that are valued, encouraged and rewarded, and those that are devalued, or even penalized. This combined with homosocial processes work to ensure that men retain positions of power within institutions. It thus offers insights into the prevalence of inertia, and the challenge of change.

Acker's representation of the ideal worker is an abstraction. It both produces and is a product of bureaucracies but lacks specificity with respect to particular sectors. Based on our data, we propose the image of the ideal academic, emerging from and constitutive of the gender regimes operating within the research university, and the wider societal regimes in which it is situated. Like Acker's more generic concept, it is the product of hegemonic masculinity, and serves to valorise certain kinds of people, marginalise others, and to legitimate the ways in which power is defined and deployed. Notably, it extends across the boundaries of academic disciplines, national cultural contexts and the global north/south divide.

In our dataset, the ideal academic was characterised in terms of external markers of success, and the personal qualities and circumstances that enabled people to be successful. An important consideration is who has access to these resources. There were similarities across the dataset. First, the ideal academic was well-known in the most prestigious networks. To establish oneself in such communities required high levels of mobility and an ability to 'fit in'. Second, the ideal academic was both aware of the rules of the game (Morley, 2013) and able to live up to them. This meant positioning themselves not only to take advantage of structures of opportunity, but also to shape them. Third, the ideal academic was seen as determined and ruthless in pursuing their agenda. Fourth, in Mexico and the UK, but less so in Sweden, the ideal academic was seen as unfettered by domestic responsibilities. The exception here was Sweden, where for men, at least, having a well-rounded life which included parental responsibilities was seen as a good thing.

Academics with the most potential to embody this ideal type look like stereotypical men. This is clearly problematic for people of all genders who do not conform to this image. Furthermore, developing this kind of profile was linked to homosociality and sponsorship – being informally supported by the right people. Notwithstanding differences between our three contexts, every respondent highlighted the importance of such networks.

This notion of the ideal academic is not only a product/constituent of a particular *organisational* gender regime. Rather, an important thread in this article is the inter-relationship between these and the wider sectoral, economic, social and political gender regimes. Echoing the empirical literature (Healy et al, 2005; Frenkel, 2008; Seierstad & Healy, 2012), in our study the most significant of these was the domestic gender regime, described by respondents across the sample as an impediment to equality at work. Of course, there were differences in degree, as evidenced in the stories above and WEF league table positions. However, notwithstanding these differences, our data point to a societal gender regime, with its own shape, processes, practices and meanings, that interacts with and is inextricable from that of the organisation. This emerged as a powerful source of inertia. Throughout the paper we have used the term 'inertia' rather than, say, resistance or recalcitrance. We did not find that people were deliberately behaving in ways

that would exacerbate inequality – as Sorensson (2013) argues, the unreflexive nature of homosociality often leads men to claim (and believe) they are anti-inequality while being blind to the ways their behaviour perpetuates inequality. Our data spoke of people not paying attention, taking their eye off the ball, thinking about other things. To us, ‘inertia’ vividly connotes this passivity.

Social researchers often highlight the importance of context in influencing structures of opportunities and constraint and argue that contextualised research will reveal important differences between social settings. However, a curious thing about this study is just how similar respondents’ stories were despite the significant differences in their contexts. The fact that respondents were based in Mexico, the UK or Sweden seemed to have little impact on their notion of the ideal academic and its implicit maleness. Moreover, notwithstanding differences in economic development or espoused national ideology, what happened outside work appeared to support rather than challenge this exclusionary picture. Perhaps as a result of the levels of global mobility in academic careers, (Baruch & Hall, 2004), the notion of the ideal academic appeared to achieve a global hegemonic status.

The question thus arises, what are the processes that underpin and support these arrangements? Based on the evidence we have provided, we suggest that the academic ideal type is continually reproduced through the interplay of policy, everyday interaction and meaning-making. Bloor and Dawson (1994) draw on Giddens’s (1979) concepts of signification, legitimation and domination to explain the stability of organisational cultures. These concepts likewise offer insights into the processes by which gender regimes are reproduced. Signification is the way in which patterns of meaning-making are learned through processes of socialisation and then refined and further consolidated through continued use. Respondents’ awareness of the value of particular kinds of networks, or how parenthood is constructed, are both examples of signification highlighted in our data.

Domination and legitimation refer to the politicised processes through which ideas, values, beliefs and ways of acting are positioned in a pecking order, defined by and working in the interests of some, and how this leads to normative regulation – the acceptance of certain views of reality as the norm. With respect to the networking example, domination highlights how certain social groups acquire prestige, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion through which people come to belong to these networks, and how this positioning comes to be seen as natural and uncontested. The concepts of domination and legitimation help us to understand the way in which some powerful men in Sweden celebrate their roles as fathers serves to normalise parenthood for everyone, although as we have seen, mothers are rarely lauded in the same way. This is not the case in Mexico, where mothers are still seen as the most appropriate parents, and men are not expected to assume parental responsibilities.

While much of the research carried out on gender, and inequality regimes more generally, has focused on processes of reproduction, our data also hint at possible triggers for change, most notably in respondents’ accounts of legitimacy – and this is where the concepts of signification, domination and legitimation become especially powerful.

Although Swedish respondents acknowledged entrenched gender inequality in their university, there was a consensus that this was unacceptable, contravening the principle of equality that they suggested was central to a Swedish identity. Moreover, they believed in the power of regulation to drive change. This was vividly illustrated in the example of how amendments to Swedish tax law with respect to employing domestic help led to the increasing acceptance of these arrangements. This is not to suggest that, from our respondents’ perspectives, regulation led change was the only solution to gender inequality. Indeed, many spoke of how it could lead to complacency. However, this did not diminish people’s belief in gender equality as an unassailable aspiration and regulation as an important means of supporting this.

In contrast, in the UK data, respondents discussed how, in this competitive, market-led system (Huppatz et al., 2019) it was external accreditation and reward systems, such as Athena SWAN and the Research Excellence Framework, that had the potential to instigate change. Where success in the various ranking exercises depended on demonstrating greater equality, universities saw no option but to address the issues. Respondents were aware of the contradictions within such processes and the inevitability of unforeseen consequences but accepted that this is how things worked in the UK, and sought to play the game as well as possible.

Mexican respondents had little faith in the prospect of institutionally-driven change. Rather, vested interests had much to gain from existing gender disparities, both within and outside of the universities, and within dominant groupings there was little appetite for change. However, the challenge to the legitimacy of these arrangements came from bottom-up grassroots organising. At the simplest level, this happened informally amongst groups of women academics. On a wider scale, respondents spoke of their growing belief in the prospect of change driven by international movements such as #MeToo – activism that achieved social recognition by working outside of the formal system.

Bloor and Dawson suggest that circular patterns of legitimation, domination and legitimisation emerge in the intersection of organisational and professional operational and cultural systems, and the wider societies in which these are situated. We might take this further, arguing that in the case of academics, these processes lead to the emergence of the academic ideal type that is continually produced and reproduced. By situating this process within gender regimes, and mapping how this process unfolds within and between gender regimes, we begin to understand the on-going reproduction of gender inequality in academia, and the surprising similarities in the lived experiences of women professors in Mexico, Sweden. This framework also allows us to better appreciate the differences in these contexts, and to identify potential catalysts for change.

Our ambition with this paper was to use a gender regime framework to better understand women professors' career experiences in three very different national cultural settings. In pursuing this goal, we likewise offer new insights into the application of the framework itself.

There are two aspects of this contribution: First, based on evidence we have provided, we argue that through the interplay of signification, domination and legitimisation (Bloor & Dawson, 1994), Acker's third group of components (visibility and awareness; legitimacy; and control and compliance) work to reproduce existing inequalities. Homosociality is intrinsic to these processes, working both under the surface and expressed through everyday practices. The image of the ideal academic is a manifestation of this interaction. Second, our analysis shows that to understand the workings of an occupational sector, we look beyond that sector, to the wider societal regimes within which it is embedded, such as the family, and to recognise that both the ongoing reproduction of existing arrangements and triggers for change emerge from the interplay of these embedded gender regimes.

### **Limitations and further research**

Our study is limited in scope, but paves the way for some exciting research directions. First, although our study mainly focused on the reproduction of inequalities, our findings hint at triggers for change, triggers that are part and parcel of the inequality regimes within which they are embedded. This is an important area for further research. Second, our work has offered a glimpse into how gender regimes play out in the UK, Mexico and Sweden, but it would be valuable to extend our reach both within these three countries, and beyond them. A third development would be to move beyond gender as the basis of inequality, to include aspects such as ethnicity and class, and their dynamic positioning, and so move from

gender to inequality regimes, though investigating how these characteristics play out across different national cultural contexts in the global north and south is clearly a complex question.

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**Table 1: Gender in higher education: UK, Mexico and Sweden**

<b>National Contextual Data<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>Mexico</b>
Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2018) overall rank (out of 149 countries)	3	15	50
• Economic participation and opportunity rank	9	52	122
• Educational Attainment rank	52	38	58
• Health and Survival rank	115	110	50
• Political empowerment rank	7	11	27
Wage equality ratio	0.74	0.65	0.47
Female share of employment in senior/middle management	39.5%	33.8%	36.4%
Representation of women at Board level in public listed companies	36%	27%	5%
<b>Higher Education Sector Data<sup>2</sup></b>			
Proportion of female PhDs	48%	46%	51% <sup>i</sup>
Proportion of female professors	28% <sup>ii</sup>	25% <sup>iii</sup>	22% <sup>i</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National data is taken from World Economic Forum Gender Inequality report (2018) unless otherwise stated

<sup>2</sup> HE Sector Data is taken from EU SHE Figures 2015 report

**Table 2: Participants**

Name	Country	Centre/faculty	Years as Professor	Children
	Sweden			
Brit		Humanities	10+	2
Klara		Music	0-5	0
Molly		Law	5-10	2
Astrid		Engineering	5-10	2
Susanna		Science	5-10	2
Amanda		Geography	0-5	2
Greta		Medicine	10+	2
Eli		Economics and Management	0-5	2
	UK			
Francis		Economics	5-10	0
Isla		Management	10+	2
Dorry		History	0-5	0
Ester		Geography	5-10	2
Jenny		Life Sciences	5-10	0
Alexa		Engineering	0-5	0
Nancy		Physics	0-5	2
Patricia		Life Sciences	0-5	2
Katie		Medicine	5-10	2
Amy		Humanities	0-5	0
Nellie		Social Sciences	0-5	0
	Mexico			
Anita		Biological & Agricultural Sciences	10+	2
Barbara		Health Sciences	10+	1
Alicia		Science & Engineering	5-10	2
Carmen		Science & Engineering	10+	1
Rahel		Economics & Management	10+	2
Blanca		Social Sciences	10+	2
Samantha		Astronomy & Astrophysics	10+	2
Alma		Architecture	5-10	2

**Table 3: Analytical framework**

<b>Themes from Acker’s gender regimes framework</b>	<b>Key codes from the data</b>	<b>Stories of similarity and difference</b>
Gender as a basis for inequality	Measures of inequality	Who succeeds?  Forces for Inertia  Levers for change
Shape and degree of inequality	Distribution of power	
Organizing processes that produce inequality. In our data, these processes can be considered mechanisms of control and compliance (Acker’s final component)	Policies	
	Recruitment	
	Promotion	
	Organisation of work Who gets the chances?	
Visibility of inequality	Domestic roles and responsibilities	
	Informal interaction	
Legitimacy of inequality	Homosociality	
	Implicit bias	
	Assumptions about appropriate gender roles How men and women differ in their approach Perceptions of winners and losers within the regime Perceptions of the processes as fair	

<sup>i</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019\\_CN\\_MEX.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_MEX.pdf). It is worth noting that 38% of doctoral degrees are in education

<sup>ii</sup> <https://english.uka.se/statistics/gender-equality-in-higher-education.html> accessed 18 December

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-01-2018/sfr248-higher-education-staff-statistics> accessed 18 December 2019