

New Voices: Gender-proofing cultural institutions: a case study on Project Arts Centre

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Abstract: Drawing from a long line of feminist scholarship, this paper examined gender relations at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, identifying the gendered conditions under which cultural workers (both male and female) participate in contemporary cultural work. In the course of mapping gender relations at Project, an occupational gender division of labour was seen to still persist within the organization. It was also found that despite the existence of a hierarchy with a concentration of power at the top of the organisation, power relations at Project are largely perceived to be de-gendered and concealed by the 'gender-neutral' organisational ideology and culture of the workplace. The study proposes the deployment of feminist theory as an organisational resource for cultural organisations. It is suggested that a feminist approach to institutionalising gender equality, effectively mobilising the Project Arts Centre as a Feminist space through its artistic programme, is likely to provide the best solution to the gender inequalities identified.

Keywords: Gender; cultural institutions; feminist theory; gender regimes

Gender-proofing cultural institutions: a case study on Project Arts Centre

Gender disparities continue to be observed within and across the Irish cultural sector at large. Yet, hampered by a chronic lack of published research, dramatic budget cuts and poor policy articulation, little attention has been paid to gender equality issues in relation to broader cultural policy agendas. (Compendium, 2018)

On 7 June 2017, #WakingTheFeminists, a grassroots campaign calling for equality for women in Irish theatre released 'gender counts'; a report detailing the results and analysis of an investigation into the gender balance of ten of the top Arts Council-funded organisations that produce or present theatre in Ireland across the years 2006 – 2015. Revealing significantly different manifestations of inequality across the various organisations sampled, 'gender counts' provided, for the first time, much-needed statistical evidence of gender disparities within the Irish theatre sector.

Understanding gender to be a pattern of social relations in which the positions and cultural meanings of men and women and their trajectories through life are constantly defined, negotiated and mapped out (Connell, 2006), this study undertook a Feminist analysis of gender relations at the Project Arts Centre (hereafter referred to as Project), investigating the gendered conditions under which cultural workers (both male and female) participate in cultural work.

Challenging numerically-based understandings and definitions of gender parity and participation, this study found that even in Project, an organisation with a female majority workforce and comparatively mid-high levels of female representation in 'gender counts', an occupational gender division of labour that facilitates the creation of gendered working patterns and working experiences still persists, and suggests that this is a self-reinforcing source of inequality. It has also been found that despite the existence of a hierarchy with a concentra-

New Voices

Samantha Bok

tion of power at the top of the organisation, power relations at Project are largely perceived to be de-gendered and concealed by the 'gender-neutral' organisational ideology and culture of the Project workplace.

Taking into account the complex and overlapping ways gender is embedded in the organisation, this study uses feminist theory as a point of departure for conceptual restructuring of the cultural workplace and suggests mobilising Project as a feminist space (essentially an agent of change guided by feminist values) that, as part of its artistic programme, actively pursues and explores solutions to gender inequalities.

Research Aims

Overall, this study aimed to:

- 1) investigate how gender is implicated in the Project Arts Centre and account for how gender relations are formed, embedded and sustained;
- 2) identify possible sites of gender disparities for feminist intervention;
- 3) propose a feminist reform strategy for the organisation;

Theoretical framework and Methodology

In order to construct an account of gender relations at Project, the study used an inductive approach guided by the principles of ethnography and grounded theory, both of which require the researcher's participation in the subjects' daily lives for an extended period of time. Although grounded theory has its own methodology, this researcher found the theoretical application of this approach to be particularly helpful in guiding what turned out to be a study with a continuously evolving research focus.

The primary data collection methods for the first part of the investigation included analysis of the 2011, 2013 and 2016/17 Project staff handbook, old press releases and other archival material, as well as general and participant observation of cultural work at Project which spanned the period from April to July 2017. The aim was to observe 'how things worked' in Project to elucidate specific aspects of the institutional context that may be producing gendered outcomes and experiences. These observations were recorded manually as field notes, which were later analysed and categorised using the framework described below.

Drawing its main analytical framework from the work of Connell (2002), who used the term 'gender regime' to refer to the pattern of gender relations within a particular institution that may in specific ways correspond, reproduce or depart from a set of wider social patterns known as the 'gender order', Project was viewed as a 'gender regime', simultaneously reflecting and constructing the roles, relations and identities of the male and female workers who work in 'creative' and 'non-creative' roles at the centre.

Connell (2002, 52 -68) proposes four analytical dimensions through which gender relations in organisations can be investigated and also suggests that each of these dimensions do not operate individually or in isolation, but are constantly intermingling and interacting to form

New Voices

Samantha Bok

institutional definitions of gender. These dimensions are outlined briefly below.

- (i) Gender division of labour: the way in which production and consumption activities can be arranged along gender lines;
- (ii) Gender division of power: the way in which control, authority, and force can be exercised along gender lines;
- (iii) Emotion and Human relations (Cathexis): the way in which feelings of attachment (positive) and antagonism (negative) can be organised along gender lines;
- (iv) Gender culture and relations: the way in which gender identities are defined in culture, the language and symbols of gender difference and prevailing beliefs and attitudes about gender.

The introduction of gender parity measures in an institution is thus seen as an effort to transform or replace a prevailing gender regime with the ultimate goal of eradicating gender as an axis of power and a force that structures organisational life (Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

Since gender inequalities in the wider cultural industries are, as current literature suggests, rooted in the discursive representation of gender as difference, whereby seemingly fixed notions of male and female, masculine and feminine are 'distinguished by a series of putatively natural, hierarchically-ranked oppositions' (Ely and Meyerson, 2000, 114) that are reflected and reinforced through social relations and mechanisms. The differential effects seemingly 'neutral' organisational mechanisms can have on men and women were consequently a focal point of this study's investigation (Kenny, 2007; Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

Acknowledging the challenges that contemporary female cultural workers face in this regard, this study chose to explore and compare the work experiences of employees at Project as they relate in particular to organisational culture, working patterns, gender stereotypes, and the impact of having caring/domestic responsibilities, sites which have been identified to produce and reinforce gender inequalities in the cultural industries more widely.

These factors were investigated empirically through a questionnaire handed out to all full-time and contract staff who reported for work at the centre over the course of two days, with the exception of the artistic director who was involved in a later part of the study. The questionnaire contained statements that were based on recurring gender-related themes that emerged during the period of observation. To ensure total anonymity of the respondents, no identification material was requested, with the exception of the respondent's gender identity. In total, the responses of 6 females and 5 males were recorded.

The diagram below shows the study's overall conceptual framework for investigating gender relations at Project with the Venn diagram demonstrating the overlapping nature of each dimension of an institution's gender regime (Connell, 2002) which is in turn surrounded by a 'gender order' that is composed and shaped by the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and post-feminism. Closely connected to neoliberalism, the latter emphasises individual agency and lessens the need for structural understandings of gender inequalities, consequently perpetuating an ideological understanding about gender that traverses individual workplaces

New Voices

and organisations (Lewis, Benschop and Simpson, 2017; Gill, Kelan and Schraff, 2016)

Samantha Bok

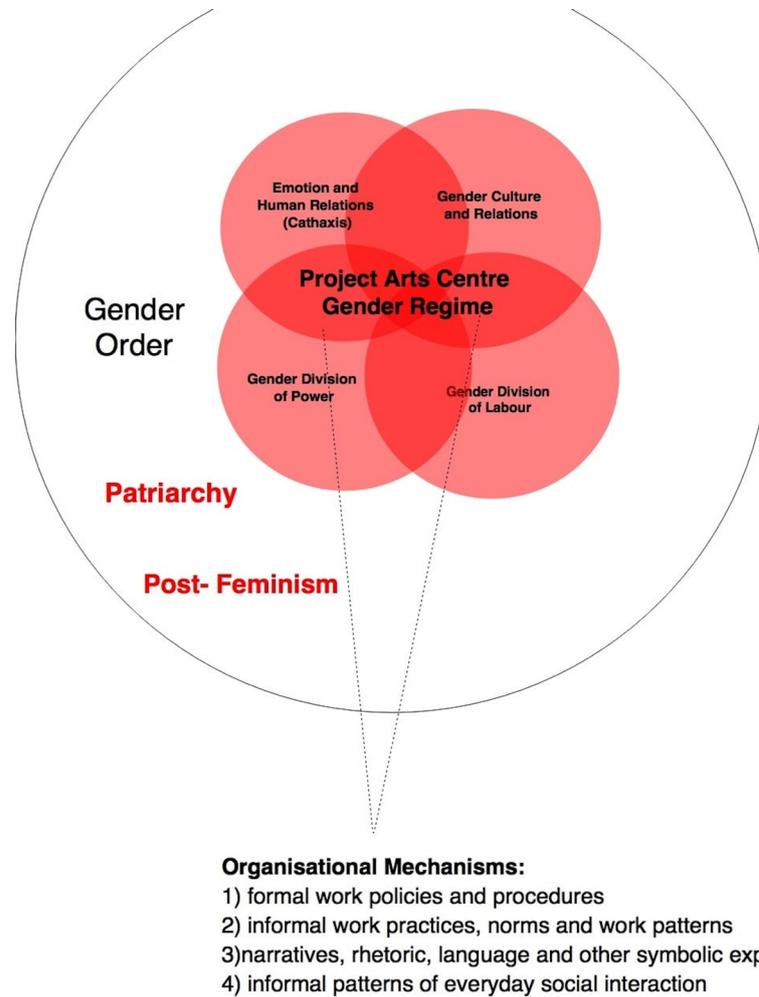


Figure 1: Project Arts Centre Gender Regime Conceptual framework

Using information gathered from all these sources to construct an account of gender relations at Project, this study then endeavoured to suggest a possible approach to achieving gender parity by conducting a SWOT analysis, using additional information and insight gained from an e-mail interview conducted with Cian O'Brien, the artistic director of Project.

Results

This section begins by presenting the study's keys findings as they relate to each dimension of Connell's (2002) gender regime framework. Given the limited scope of this study, the observations listed here are by no means exhaustive and are intended to be of a preliminary nature. These observations should also not be read in isolation but taken together in order to get a holistic view of gender relations at Project.

New Voices

Samantha Bok

Gender division of labour

Overall, this study identified gender division of labour to be the most marked feature of segregated gender relations at Project. Examining the gender composition of the organisation, it was observed that despite an overall female 2:1 ratio of female to male staff members, Project exhibits employment patterns consistent with those of an occupational gender division of labour, with all its core administrative and marketing and communications roles filled by females and core technical roles and technical support roles filled by males. These patterns are consistent with findings from a study conducted by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2015) who report similar gendered occupational segregation trends in the cultural industries in England. On this note, the following additional observations were made that point to the implications of this occupational gender segregation.

Firstly, episodes pointing to a micro-gender division of labour were observed to surface occasionally in the course of daily organisational life. It was noted for instance that when it came to staff welfare events, it fell largely to the administrative staff, all of whom are women, to organize them; whilst activities involving physical labour and/or technical equipment and faults were dealt with largely by the production/technical staff, who are all men.

Secondly, a systematic observation and comparison of work and work routines of the staff revealed gendered working patterns within the organisation. In order to better aid analysis, roles at Project were reclassified into 3 categories using Lizé's (2016) typology of intermediary cultural labour: *mediation* referring to 'the public facing role of guiding the audience through its relationship with the artworks'; *management* referring to 'the management of cultural institutions and its staff'; and *intermediaries of production* referring to those who have 'an active hand in the creation process' (Lizé, 2016 p.36). Due to the clustering of males and females in certain roles, which in the case of Project were *management* and *intermediaries of production* respectively, significant quantitative (as in working hours) and qualitative (as in work load, ability to exercise flexible work options) differences in the work patterns and overall work experiences of both genders were observed, leading to the observation that the workplace and employment norms created and sustained by such occupational segregation is a self-reinforcing source of inequality.

Gender division of Power

As in traditional bureaucratic structures, power at Project is formally defined through differences relating to authority, seniority and salary (Connell, 2006). Examining the organisation's formal reporting structure, it was observed that power at Project is still arranged hierarchically, with authority concentrated at the top and delegated downward. At Project, power manifests on two levels: 'creative' and 'operational'.

In a 'creative' sense, there are two positions of 'power' in Project: the 'artistic director' role and the 'visual arts curator' role. Although a person of each gender fills each position, according to the formal structure of the organisation, it is the male artistic director whom the female visual arts curator reports to and who ultimately holds the most prestigious role as the creative head of the organisation.

In an 'operational' sense, due to the high levels of female representation in the organisation, the organisation's small size and the specialisation of job functions, most of the female workers appear to hold key organisational positions. However, there is, in effect, a dual authority structure in the organisation with two discernible levels of management: the 'upper managers' comprising the artistic director, who is the overall head of the organisation and the general manager, who as the personnel officer is also the person all staff report to on matters regard-

New Voices

Samantha Bok

ing employment, and the 'middle managers' who run departments that have bigger staff numbers such as the Front of House / Box Office, Bar and Production departments respectively.

A parallel was drawn between the organisation's hierarchical structure and its physical design and office layout providing a concrete example of how the organisation's hierarchy is reflected in the lived experience of all who work there.

Crucially, it was also found that power at Project is largely conceived to be de-gendered with a hierarchy rendered compatible with the organisation's pro-feminist ideological position. This was attributed to the organisation's largely successful fusion of organisational culture with organisational ideology, achieved in part through the creation of an 'open' and 'flat' work culture fostered through several rather nondescript organisational practices and the consultative management styles practiced by its upper managers.

Emotion and Human relations / Gender culture and relations

Partly due to the way it frequently features in the centre's artistic programming, gender was found to be a prominent although hardly polarising feature when it comes to workplace relations amongst the staff. If anything, it was observed that relatively stable interpersonal workplace relations prevail, as the majority of the staff have worked at the organisation (and with each other) for a significant amount of time. The findings from the questionnaire also show that the staff all hold similarly strong, positive shared beliefs and attitudes towards gender equality, with the majority of respondents (both male and female) expressing confidence in the organisation's approach and ability to deal with gender and issues of inequality.

However, gendered patterns of response were discernible from the questionnaire as well, particularly when it came to questions relating to structural inequalities within the organisation and the sector. The opposing viewpoints expressed by both genders are significant in that they may point to differing attitudes in relation to the type and process in which gender parity measures should be implemented in the organisation, and thus should be investigated further.

All in all, in attempting to map Project's 'gender regime', gender was observed to be intricately embedded in the organisation, both formally and informally, affecting organisational outcomes and structuring how people are recruited, how work is divided, how job functions are defined and how jobs are perceived. Not only that, as the questionnaire findings illustrate, each individual's experience of gender and inequalities are unique and cannot be solely captured empirically.

Strategies for reform

In proposing that the pursuit of transformation and organisational change should itself be the goal of gender equality, Ely and Meyerson (2000) suggest an open-ended localized intervention strategy that continuously identifies, disrupts and revises the existing gendered social order of organisations. The SWOT analysis revealed this approach to be compatible with feminist principles and, taking into account the nature of gender relations at Project and ways of working in the Irish cultural sector, that there are three main approaches Project can take in pursuit of gender reform to realise its transformation as a Feminist space.

1) Practicing an iterative, collaborative approach to gender reform

Effective implementation requires that strategies for reform are not implemented top-down. Staff should be consulted and involved throughout the process. What is more, given the dynamic nature of gender relations, feedback needs to be constant and consistent to ensure that inequalities are captured as and when they happen.

New Voices

Samantha Bok

2) Creative gender reform initiatives

One of the organisation's key weaknesses as noted during the interview was that it does not produce most of the artistic work that is presented at the venue and in effect has little control over the creative and/or hiring process. Instead of renegotiating existing relationships and practices, this study proposes that Project uses itself as a primary site of investigation to pilot its own artistic projects to explore gender-equitable ways of cultural production. In this way, change is presented as non-threatening to existing practices and norms, while making use of Project's strength as a risk-taking experimental arts organisation. It is crucial then that the pursuit of gender equality itself be viewed as a key organisational value, embedded sustainably within the organisation's culture and practices

3) Involve external collaborators

Gender inequalities are perpetuated through maintaining industry norms and seemingly 'neutral' organisational practices. Therefore, reform should also be collectively facilitated. Given Project's unique artistic and institutional remit, well-established reputation and working relationships with the sector, it can avail of general goodwill in its various formal and informal network(s) and invite external collaborators to take part in these initiatives, approaching these experiments as a collective artistic exercise and a strategic opportunity to be an industry leader in this regard.

Conclusion

At the time this study was conducted Project took a neutral stance towards the issue of gender equality, preferring not to overtly recognize or mark gender difference through its 'equal opportunity' approach. Since then, the organisation has taken on board this study's findings and adopted an explicit feminist stance, committing itself in its new strategy Project 2020 (Project Arts Centre, 2018) to developing a new equality and diversity policy. Moving gender reform from paper to practice requires strategies to not only be planned, incremental and bottom-up (Benschop and Verloo, 2011) but also 'highly context-sensitive; emergent; in tune with local politics....and pervious to experimentation, reflection, and learning' (Weick, 2000 in Ely and Meyerson, 2000, p. 133).

Turning the focus to the broader cultural landscape, it is noteworthy that while gender mainstreaming principles have been adopted at national policy level in Ireland since 1999 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018), they have to-date neither guided nor catalysed state intervention. With reform measures and indeed gender equality being itself an abstract multi-faceted concept, it is crucial that clearly defined organisational goals and strong mechanisms of accountability are in place to ensure that good intentions are followed through in good practice, and that organisations that demonstrate a willingness to embrace change are better supported and resourced to enhance the long term sustainability of reform efforts.

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New Voices

Samantha Bok

About the author. Samantha Bok is a recent graduate of the UCD MA in Cultural Policy and Arts management course. Originally from Singapore and now based in Dublin, Samantha has extensive arts administration and management experience in the Visual Arts. She is particularly interested in the inequalities surrounding cultural production and consumption and remains committed to a career path supporting complex and thoughtful contemporary artistic production with a focus on facilitating ethical practice and collaboration, equal access and diversity.

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