

ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE SIXTH FORM COLLEGE

# Career, Catholicism and Culture

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An exploration of the career experience of women managers in Catholic Sixth Form Colleges

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As a teacher, interest in the development of the human potential is ingrained and now, as a leader in education, I have a particular interest in the capacity of people to grow, learn and find challenges which will give them personal and professional satisfaction. For ten years as Deputy Principal of a Catholic sixth form college, and now Principal of a non-denominational sixth form college, I have a privileged position from which to view the careers of the staff and four years ago decided to carry out some research into the career experiences of women leaders in Catholic Sixth Form Colleges. Whilst the research was conducted in a very specific niche of the sixth form college sector, there being fifteen Catholic Sixth Form Colleges in England and one in Wales, some of the findings are relevant to women leaders in education more generally.

Research into women's work is a relatively new phenomenon. Books on women and work exist from the first part of the twentieth century. In 1942 there were such things written as 'The Psychology of Supervising the Working Woman' (Laird, 1942) where chapter titles such as 'Adjusting Work to Women's Brain Power' leave one laughing aloud in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since then, there has been a plethora of literature documenting women's under-representation in management posts. However, studies on leadership have primarily assumed a male model of leadership and even at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is much writing which assumes if not a male model of leadership, at least a gender-neutral one. I was interested in exploring women's experience of their careers and whether they faced particular barriers or opportunities which might be of interest in influencing the ways in which we support our staff now and in the future.

Discussion with women managers in the sixteen sixth form colleges about their experiences of work raised many issues and these were some of the key points they made:

- that women are very happy working in Catholic sixth form colleges whilst acknowledging that the culture sometimes militates against their sense of being recognised for the work they do.

All my interviewees had very many positive things to say about the environment within which they worked. They spoke highly of the support they received and of the values which the institution promulgated. They spoke of their enjoyment of their work with young people and commitment to the enterprise of education in which they are engaged. They spoke of teaching as a real pleasure and of the desire to do a satisfying job. Indeed many women spoke of their 'love' of their jobs. Their enjoyment clearly outweighed any of the negative aspects which they perceived.

- that Catholic sixth form colleges support women with children in their role as mothers very strongly. This support of mothers was identified as being specifically linked to the Church's respectful attitude towards mothers and families.

There was a clear sense that as mothers, the women were supported and that Principals often went out of their way to be flexible in their approach to making combining working life and motherhood possible.

- that Catholic sixth form colleges are very supportive of the professional development of their staff. Given the belief that every person is precious, all staff felt valued and were supported in their training.

Women spoke highly of staff development programmes and welcomed the fact that when they asked for education and training their requests were granted.

- that colleges have a strong pastoral culture which extends to staff and students alike. This pastoral culture is underpinned strongly by the Catholic mission and ethos of the colleges.

Women praised the ethos of the colleges, an ethos where people matter, their concerns are important, they are seen as individuals and where they felt that managers cared for them as human beings and not just as employees.

- that they are angry with the ways in which the Catholic Church does not afford them a significant voice in the ways in which the Church is organised.

Comments on the ways in which they are either silenced or not encouraged to speak out about how they feel about the Church were made with feeling. Women did not feel that they had any forum in which they might articulate their own experience of being a member of the Church and they particularly felt that they did not have a channel for expressing their disquiet about their position as women in the Catholic Church.

- that women are mostly saddened by the way in which the Catholic Church offers them limited roles to play.

Like a leitmotif throughout the interviews, the words 'sad', 'saddened' and 'sadness' echoed regularly. When discussing their relationship with the Catholic Church or when talking about the way they feel when they think about the contribution of women to the work of the Church and the waste or lack of use of talent by the Church, many women spoke of their sad feelings.

- that women are cautious of, and sometimes fear, speaking out critically about the Catholic Church and its associated networks.

Several women expressed fear of speaking critically of the Catholic Church and some were concerned that their careers would be negatively affected if they were heard not to be conforming to the 'official' views of the Church.

- that governing bodies have the power to influence the policy on recruitment and promotion at the highest levels of management and that they have shown themselves to be prejudicial towards women for a variety of reasons.

Women have explained how governing bodies discriminated against them by asking questions, about childcare, for example, which they would not have asked of men. They felt they were treated unfairly and perceived as less reliable than men.

- the composition of governing bodies of Catholic sixth form colleges often constitute members of the clergy who do not always see the role of women as equal to men.

A specifically Catholic issue, interviewees commented on the fact that male clergy did not always heed them with courtesy and attention whilst making particular efforts to engage male colleagues in conversation, for example. They showed a lack of interest in women which was not the case when they interacted with men.

- that women see limited possibilities for their promotion in Catholic sixth form colleges and see men as having preferential prospects.

Feelings of betrayal, unfairness and bitterness were articulated when describing being passed over. Several women mentioned the strong feelings they had when they did not get jobs or felt like they had been treated unfairly, talking of 'bitterness' and 'anger'. When discussing the role of women in the Catholic Church extreme epithets such as 'appalling' were used while some were more moderate in their use of language.

- that more Catholic colleges are led by male principals proportionately than in the sixth form sector as a whole.

In April 2008, there were three female principals of Catholic sixth form colleges out of sixteen (18.75%) whereas there were twenty-one out of eighty (26.75%) of non-denominational colleges.

- that women in the colleges led by women articulated a different cultural philosophy than those in colleges led by men.

Women in the colleges led by women talked of how it was important that women were seen to have the same opportunities as men and that they had many women managers. The culture supported the promotion of women and was taken for granted as part of the colleges' ethos.

- that women do not have sufficient opportunities to reflect on their careers.

Several women felt that they had not hitherto been given the opportunity to talk in such detail about their working lives and their career progression as I had afforded them. This throws into question the nature of their appraisals or professional development reviews and the extent to which the discussions explored fully the concerns of women teachers and managers. The fact that they had much to say when they were given an opportunity to tell their career 'stories' and that they say that they said and thought things about their careers which they had not thought or said before, demonstrates a need to address the opportunities women, and men, have for reflective practice.

- that women universally lack confidence in their own abilities and feel that it prevents them from putting themselves forward, whether it be for promotion or to stand up and speak in public.

Even women who appeared to be confident claimed that they had significant self-doubt and that their confidence was mostly a matter of bluffing their way through events.

- that women in areas where there are few, if any other sixth form colleges, feel particularly isolated from professional networks and support.

Women, especially senior managers, articulated their feelings of being alone, not having anyone to talk to, despite supportive principals, if they worked in colleges which were not located in clusters. Whilst there are 25,018 schools in the country (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) statistics, 2007), there are only ninety-six sixth form colleges and of those which share a common and distinctive mission as Catholic colleges, only sixteen, the main concentration being in London and the north west. The need to talk to women in similar circumstances was seen as important for professional support.

- that male Catholic networks facilitate the career development of male teachers.

Women spoke of the ways in which young male teachers seemed to find older, experienced and influential mentors who 'oiled the wheels' of their careers. Contacts with organisations such as the Catenians, to which women do not have access, were also seen to support men.

The research highlights the very real issues which women working in Catholic sixth form colleges face on a daily basis and also reveals the equally real benefits, pleasure and the professional fulfilment which women articulate when talking about their experience of work in such institutions. It draws attention to an area of work which impacts on at least 1600 women currently employed in Catholic sixth form colleges and will affect those who are employed in the future.

Of course, because I did not do a comparative study, there remains the question as to whether there are any barriers which are peculiar to working in a Catholic sixth form college as opposed to a non-denominational institution, though my hunch is that some of the issues are relevant to secular schools and colleges.

The research has significant implications for training and development, networking and support opportunities. Women managers need to know that they are not isolated, that they are encouraged and empowered to be personally and professionally effective, and that they have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences particularly related to leadership and management. They need good mentors and to be part of supportive networks which help build confidence. Given the paucity of applicants for leadership roles in both schools and colleges, it is imperative that the issues raised by the women in this research are addressed.