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Supporting Women in Geography (SWIG) Ireland: Confronting the role of gender and asserting the importance of the female voice

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Abstract: In this collection, several authors – ranging from early career to well established academics – consider the role of women and the female voice in academia. This compilation developed from a conference session organised by the Supporting Women in Geography (SWIG) Ireland group, at the Conference of Irish Geographers in University College Cork (UCC) in 2017. In the first piece, Ahern and Mc Ardle consider why this discussion is necessary at all, ruminating on examples from both within and outside of academia. Till then brings in her experience working in Ireland, the US and beyond, and reflects on the importance of including all voices, and challenges scholars to end gender discrimination in Ireland. Manzo then reflects on how female work in academia, similar to community organising, can be considered invisible, devalued labour (Daniels, 1987). Yet she focuses on the positives of this, outlining the women-centred community organising model, the social capital that is involved, and the range of activities for empowering women to alter the efforts in Irish academia to making this change. Meletis then widens this discussion with an international example of a group similar to SWIG Ireland, Inspiring Women Among Us (IWAU) in Canada. She reflects on the difficulty of being an inclusive group. These discussions are vital to tackling gender bias in Irish academia, yet all the authors agree this needs to be an ongoing conversation, a lived practice, and we hope this work inspires further contributions to this cause.

Keywords: *women in Geography; power; feminism; mentorship; community; Ireland; academia*

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Introduction

> *'The liberal concept of equality of opportunity has no purchase in situations of extreme structural inequality'* (McDowell and Peake, 1990, 27).

This statement is as true today as it was nearly thirty years ago. As Gloria Steinem was quoted as saying, 'The truth will set you free. But first it will piss you off'. The *truth* is that there is a lot of justifiable anger around the slowness of progress to reduce inequality. Change can occur monstrously slowly over time. The wins and increased presence of women in academic geography cannot be denied yet the pace is often demoralisingly slow. Added to this is the fact that 'representation varies considerably by place and time, and that "progress" is not linear' (Monk *et al.,* 2004, 85). Historically, women in the discipline of geography have faced unique challenges which have stopped their access to higher positions. Although this situation is improving, it is also a continued presence which haunts the discipline, alongside other problematic blockages on the lines of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and many others. We are aware that other groups within the discipline also face issues of a different and yet similar nature, not least of which is the lack of stability (which is sadly becoming the norm), lack of representation, lack of voices, and a narrow worldview. Our focus here is intended to find ways forward and not to exclude further any other group. We are equally aware that we focus our contribution here entirely within the Anglo-American worldview. However, this is the structure and context within which we are working and organising. At present, it is the place where we aim to have an impact. As Rebecca Solnit (2016) has argued, we need to find 'hope' in the dark, by celebrating the steps made towards changing a system, instead of lamenting not already being at the end destination, in our case, gender equality in academia.

All of the pieces in this collection face this dual task: questioning why gender inequality still exists while also praising what has been achieved by activists. In addition, various authors consider the role of women and the female voice in academia. This compilation developed from a conference session organised by the Supporting Women in Geography (SWIG) Ireland group, at the Conference of Irish Geographers in University College Cork (UCC) in 2017. In the first piece, Ahern and Mc Ardle consider why this discussion is necessary at all, ruminating on examples both from within and outside academia. Till then brings in her experience working in Ireland, the US and beyond, and reflects on the importance of including *all* voices, and challenges scholars to end gender discrimination in Ireland. Manzo then reflects on how female work in academia, similar to community organising, can be considered invisible, devalued labour (Daniels, 1987). Yet she focuses on the positives of this, how women-centred organisations achieve a form of 'co-active power' (Stall and Stoecker, 2008, 244), outlining this women-centred community organising model, the social capital that is involved, and the range of activities for empowering women to alter the efforts in Irish academia to making this change. Meletis then concludes this discussion with an international example of a group similar to SWIG Ireland, Inspiring Women Among Us (IWAU) in Canada. She reflects on the difficulty of being an inclusive group, posing several important questions about the current 'fork' in

the road. These discussions are vital to tackling gender bias in Irish academia, yet all the authors agree this needs to be an ongoing conversation, a lived practice, and we hope this work inspires further contributions to this cause.

The experience of being a woman in academia is often challenging. Emilie Pine (2018), within her collection of personal essays, refers to the experience of being a woman in academia and some of the inherent sexism within the system. We wish to include here a particularly striking example, due specifically to its everydayness;

> *'Women are meant to be flattered by being told we look young because, for a woman, looks are the most important thing, and youth is the best look of all. But in informing me that I look youthful, or that I don't understand because I'm too naive, or asking me if I'm a student when I am clearly a tenured lecturer, these men strip from me more than a decade of professional experience and expertise. The so-called compliment is, in fact, an instant demotion'* (Pine, 2018, 164).

Sadly, Pine's experience is not a unique one and leads to questions about how to confront these obvious issues within, and beyond, academia.

Michelle Obama (2018) wrote in her recent book *Becoming* that she often felt the need to prove herself (for many reasons but largely due to both gender and race). She needed to be twice as careful not to misstep and twice as good within her role. This is a familiar refrain for many women, not least because of the long-held, deeply entrenched cultural structures that we need to confront (continuously). This fear of the misstep is well known, where the fear is that one wrong move can spell doom. This anxiety to be twice as good is often coupled with 'imposter syndrome', the idea that one is not good enough and that someone will figure out one day that one does not belong in academia. Although not unknown to male academics, Kate Bahn (2014) has recognised that women are far more susceptible to imposter syndrome, and that it is also most common at higher levels of academia, so as one becomes more successful, the more likely one is to be plagued by these doubts, and women are more affected by this. Caplan describes this adroitly, 'the combination of women's traditionally low self-esteem and the maleness of the academic environment can make it exceedingly difficult for a woman in academia to remember that she is basically intelligent and competent' (1993, 77). She adds, 'know that you – being human – will make some wrong choices and don't panic about that' (78).

Similarly, within her recent book *Women and Power* (2017), Mary Beard states: 'If I were starting this book again from scratch, I would find more space to defend women's right to be wrong, at least occasionally'. The need to remove this fear and double standard is necessary. The fear of speaking and making a mistake has silenced far too many voices. In addition, she discusses the voice of women and suggests that there 'is a tradition of gendered speaking – and the theorising of gendered speaking – to which we are still, directly or more often indirectly, the heirs' (20), suggesting that while some things have changed, the traditions and expectations of public speech and debate still remain largely as those formed in the classical world of Greece and Rome. 'These attitudes, assumptions

and prejudices are hard-wired into us… into our culture, our language and millennia of our history'. They exist in our modes of citation and referencing even today. Heather McLean highlights the issue of the neoliberal citation economy which simply 'reproduce their expertise and modes of thought' (McLean, 2018, 4), a circular mode of thought which demonstrates that, in fact, many scholars or potentially 'all scholarship is subject to such power dynamics and that we are all ensnared in reproducing these contradictions' (McLean, 2018, 4). Thus, within this system it is easy to imagine why particular hierarchies and exclusions persist. Inequality hurts everyone, both in academia and wider society.

The Supporting Women in Geography (SWIG) Ireland group intends to be a research network for all Irish Geographers. Established in 2016, SWIG aims to bring people together in a supportive and engaging environment through which to highlight and address gender (and other intersectional) inequalities, while also celebrating the diverse perspectives that women bring to the discipline of Geography. SWIG Ireland has a dual role. Not only does it provide a safe space to discuss and brainstorm how to fight these inequalities, but also it presents a forum to recognise the positive work being done by women in Irish geography. By recognising the female voice in Irish academia, SWIG is giving voice to those who are more likely to be silenced. The establishment and growth of the SWIG group has been a significant presence at the Conference of Irish Geographers (CIG) in recent years. This is the largest geography conference which takes place in Ireland. The papers in this collection emerged from one of the first panels organised by SWIG Ireland, in May 2017 and the featured authors were speakers at this well-received event.

All three papers in this collection acknowledge the problems facing women which we have discussed here. They take different views on the role of mentorship and support networks, as well as how to challenge the status quo. Mentorship offers help to navigate the largely complex and confusing academic system within which a unique set of skills and practices are needed in order to survive and prosper.

These papers, and SWIG Ireland more generally, offer experiences and support to begin to create opportunities to overcome challenges and difficulties facing women in academia. We agree with Solnit that in order to hope for a better world, we need action, and the three papers here illustrate these actions, focused on change in the everyday reality of the spaces we live and work in. We hope that these papers will encourage you to take a chance, to take risks, to evolve as scholars, and to get involved as a mentee, mentor, group member or organiser, so that you use your voice to influence the future direction for women in geography.

1 Challenging Gender Discrimination in Irish Geography

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Mary Beard's *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (2017) opens with a thirty-year old cartoon by Riana Duncan depicting five men and one woman, all professionally dressed, sitting around a table (Figure 1). The cartoon parodies what Beard describes as 'the well-known male deafness' to women's voices and ideas. The caption reads: 'That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it.' As Beard goes on to note, 'there is hardly a woman who has opened her mouth at a meeting and not had, at some time or other, the "Miss Triggs treatment"'(Beard, 2017, 7).



Figure 1: Miss Triggs Treatment. Source: Duncan (1988) in Beard (2017).

According to Beard (2017), the 'male deafness' described above – which ironically includes arrogant (and loud) 'man-splaining' (Solnit, 2014) – is intrinsic to Western understandings of power and shapes gender discrimination in academia. I expect that I am not alone in having also experienced 'male deafness' at academic staff meetings. Geography was and continues to be a male dominated discipline when compared to other related fields (Lunn, 2016), such as Anthropology and Sociology. In the context of Irish culture, 'where there is a deeply embedded idea that women are not suited to authority' (O'Connor, 1998, 8, cited in Ní Laoire and Linehan, 2002, 1), this may be even more pronounced in higher education institutions. The Higher Education Authority's 2016 study of gender equality was blunt: 'Since the establishment of the first Irish University 424 years ago, there has never been a female President' (HEA, 2016, 8). In this short essay, I draw upon my personal experiences, backed by some data, to call out gender discrimination and patterns of silencing women, but I also describe pathways of 'hope' (Davis, 2016; Solnit, 2016), including creating networks of support, finding mentors, and protecting spaces of intellectual curiosity and play.

I wish to preface this discussion by noting how heartened I am to see the progress that has been made since I first began my postgraduate degrees. There are more women staying in the profession, despite the fact that senior women continue to face discrimination, a point I return to below (MIT, 1999). During the nine years that I was a postgraduate in two nationally ranked US Geography departments (during the late 1980s to mid-1990s), there was not one tenured female lecturer or professor in human geography I could work with. Now I work in a department that has one-third female permanent staff members, including four female Professors in human geography. The changes I have personally witnessed reflect patterns documented in a 2016 study by the American Association of Geographers: although we are far from equity, there are now more women getting postgraduate degrees, holding postdocs, awarded tenured positions and in senior posts, a trend that has increased over the past ten years (Lunn, 2016). With the launch of the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland in 2015, higher educational institutions (still largely run by well-paid men) are being forced not only to acknowledge existing gender inequities, but also to demonstrate action plans to address those structural problems (Equality Challenge Unit, 2019; HEA, 2016). With more women in senior positions and institutions starting to address discriminatory work cultures, younger and early career scholars have a wider range of role models, which may bring a more diverse group of women into the profession and encourage them to stay. Indeed, I am reassured to see the growing confidence of my female students with each incoming cohort, and am very proud of how they have contributed to improving gender equity in our discipline, such as the launch in 2016 of the national professional group, Supporting Women in Geography in Ireland, an initiative largely spearheaded by postgraduate female students.

However, I remain frustrated that the daily discrimination experienced by my peers, mentors, and students over the years still remains largely ignored, even by individuals whom I trust and respect. I have experienced, witnessed or learned of gender discrimination, ranging from what I would consider smaller, unintentional acts to wilfully predatory ones in all of my workplaces in the US, UK, and Ireland, and through shorter

residencies and research visits in Canada, Chile, France, Germany, New Zealand and South Africa. Gender discrimination is clearly evident in the differential salaries paid to men and women for the same work (Frederickson, 2018). Yet despite state and national legislation for wage equality, little actual change has transpired (Donegan, 2018). Overall, numbers of women in senior posts remain low; only 19% of all Professors in Ireland are women (HEA, 2016, 8). At the time I started working in Ireland in January 2011, there was only one female Professor of Geography in post (but see Simms, 2016); as of this year, 2019, there were seven, which still seems quite low for ten departments (in the Republic and Northern Ireland). To my knowledge, there has never been an advertisement for a post in Feminist Geography in the Republic. In addition, I would argue that a gendered division of labour exists in most academic workplaces, as women are often expected to do more departmental and student pastoral work (they are assumed to be 'naturally' better at difficult emotional labour), and the burden of administrative and 'service' work often falls unequally on women. For example (and ironically), to ensure gender diversity, the statistically fewer (especially senior) women are asked and expected to sit on more committees than the average male, even though many of those women may prefer to use their time for research (which is more highly valued for tenure and promotion than either teaching or service). The acceptance of such 'norms' translates to a loss of total personal and family income over a lifetime and across generations, as well as uneven access to networks of power, space and resources. That, together with regular episodes of the 'Miss Triggs treatment', means that women's voices and contributions (in the lecture hall, workplace and research fields) continue to be silenced or not acknowledged.

Feminists historically and in the present-day have identified forms of structural injustice (Young, 1990) at the workplace, so why do these facts, along with women's voices, continue to be ignored and not acted upon? In a groundbreaking MIT report about gender discrimination in the sciences (MIT, 1999), researchers discovered that they had to state the obvious: multiple forms of gender discrimination are not easy to recognise by both men and women because they are so deeply and culturally embedded. Those who pointed to patterns of discrimination found that 'no one heard them' as others believed 'that each problem could be explained alternatively by its "special circumstances". Only when the women came together and shared their knowledge, only when the data were looked at through this knowledge and across departments, were the patterns irrefutable' (ibid, 10). Four specific findings of the MIT study are worth noting here. First, it was senior, not junior, women who felt the most 'invisible'. Even though they were recognised for their work internationally, they felt 'excluded from a voice in their departments and from positions of any real power', making 'their jobs increasingly difficult and less satisfying' (Young, 1990, 8). Second, the effects of gender discrimination with seniority 'repeats itself over generations':

> *'Each generation of young women, including those who are currently senior faculty, began by believing that gender discrimination was "solved" in the previous generation and would not touch them. Gradually however, their eyes were opened to the realization that the playing field is not level after all, and that they had paid a high price both personally and professionally as a result'* (Young, 1990, 9).

Third, these senior women worked at above average to outstanding levels of performance, despite being discriminated against: by having less access to space, resources and equipment; by earning lower salaries; by not being rewarded with salary responses to outside offers; and by being underpaid pensions. Finally, they found that both men and women discriminate, with some women believing that evaluating their peers favourably would make themselves appear weak.

These findings led the authors of the MIT study to conclude that gender 'discrimination consists of a pattern of powerful but unrecognized assumptions and attitudes that work systematically against women faculty even in the light of obvious good will' (Young, 1990, 10). What was different at MIT, compared to most other institutions, was that following the recommendations of this study, the Dean took immediate steps to redress the inequities senior women identified, resulting in positive gains overall, including higher productivity and enhanced recruitment of women. By recognising gender discrimination through the study, forms of immediate reparation, and initiating larger structural changes (such as including women in senior decision-making structures), the University as a whole benefitted, and in a relatively short period of time.

So how can we navigate the culturally embedded patterns of gender discrimination until our Deans and Presidents offer compensation and structural change? Learning to listen to stories of gender discrimination is a first step. Early on as a postgraduate, perhaps similar to the younger scholars in the study above, I naively assumed that higher educational institutions would somehow be morally superior to the sexist world of private business, media and the arts I was leaving (after a period of eye-opening internships). When, instead, I experienced overt forms of harassment and discrimination, I was especially surprised by the lack of understanding or even acknowledgement of my situation from more established colleagues, and sometimes among those who wanted to support me, both male and female. Responses included jokes about sexist behaviour being 'normal' by colleagues, or telling stories of previous harassment by the same (protected) person (instead of warning me in advance). Such retorts are part of the problem. The recent movements of *#MeToo* and *#IBelieveHer* are examples of how personal stories undermine attempts to justify or dismiss blatant oppression.

In addition to learning to listen, an invaluable second step is creating and building support systems that allow multiple voices to co-exist. In order to discover one's own voice, we must find other like-minded people, who can co-create safe spaces to express different opinions. Environments of mutual care encourage an appreciation of the diversity of one's colleagues and peers, which in my case, has included activists, artists, practitioners and people living non-traditional lifestyles. At first I joined existing groups as a means just to get by, and later, organised female-only tea breaks as informal support groups where sharing meals and jokes could also happen. When I began to actively search out other systems of support, I found the powerful secret 'sisterhoods' where many women come together, such as through the formal and informal mentoring of the AAG's Geographic Perspectives on Women Speciality Group networks at large national conferences. At conferences, I also got to know women from other departments, whose

support and friendship helped me stumble through new work situations, face unexpected challenges, and be inspired by their adventures.

Seeking out mentors and role models is a third important tool in fighting gender discrimination. As a postgraduate, when I was going through a difficult time, I found that helpful advice and wisdom from feminist geographers Margaret Fitzsimmons and Linda McDowell (the latter of whom visited our department for a semester), and a geography education mentor Gail Hobbs, helped boost my confidence. Their affirming presence reminded me of why I was pursuing my degree, and allowed me to enjoy again the pleasure I found in reading challenging ideas and doing my research. They also helped me to recognise why the absence of human geography female lecturers resulted in an unhealthy place for me to study and work. When going for my first job interview, I asked the head of my department, Wally Brinkman, a climatologist, for help; she was the only female geographer I felt I could approach. She sat me down, closed the door, asked what I was going to wear, and lent me her copy of Paula Caplan's (1993) *Lifting a Ton of Feathers*. She correctly informed me that it was more important to read the book on the airplane than to review my job talk. Who knew that she would provide so much encouragement? (And I got the job!). That book later helped me when I began mentoring my own students. I also found support from: women in an interdisciplinary Gender Studies programme, including 'Ms. Mentor' (Toth, 1997); a neighbour working at a historically Black University (HBCU) who taught me about community service learning and mentored me about publicly engaged teaching and research (an approach that radically changed how I understood my work); a book writing group leader who reminded me of the reasons why I wanted to write a book rather than a series of articles, when I was getting contradictory tenure advice in the department; and a Dakota artist/educator who patiently helped me on my (ongoing) journey of decolonisation. These female mentors and a number of my peers (diverse in age, race, sexuality, discipline, nationality, and political leanings) ultimately helped me to survive heavy teaching loads, student and staff harassment (considered typical by some staff for young female lecturers), additional job requirements that did not count towards tenure, departmental power hierarchies, and a very stressful tenure process. There were also important male mentors, including Peter Jackson, Denis Cosgrove and Mark Boyle, the last of whom helped me to navigate important periods of personal transition, including elder care and promotion to full Professor.

A fourth lesson: do not be afraid of collaborating with others and not knowing where the outcomes may lead. Along the way, I participated in, and later formed, creative networks with like-minded but very different people, who supported a shared intellectual curiosity, needed to experiment and connect, and desired to explore possible spaces of social change. Doing so has reminded me of the advice of Angela Davis (2016, 1): avoid the 'insidious promotion of capitalist individualism', which I take in an academic setting to mean, avoid competition and being your own worst critic. When surrounded by peers and mentors that you trust and who challenge you to grow, you become more confident in your own judgement. Connecting with like-minded people also means not feeling overwhelmed by the 'defeatist perspective' that often is associated with 'critical'

forms of political progressive movements (Solnit, 2016). Finding others has empowered me to explore and navigate the grey spaces of academia. With my students and peers, I have made new connections across and beyond the University, and experiment with the possibilities of feminist activist academia.

I began my essay with the image of the 'Miss Triggs treatment', but I hope that these ways to navigate gender discrimination offer solidarity and hope. With others, we have created networks and spaces that invite a more diverse group of people to claim our right to learn, to try, to imagine, to fall, to try better, and in so doing, have made our work spaces healthier. I invite you now to imagine we are sitting and standing around a table, with many women and some men, trying out our ideas for this commentary. One of us has baked a cake. We begin sharing our ideas. There is laughter and a debate erupts, and a positive buzz fills the room. New connections are made and old ones affirmed. Someone slides a plate to me, as I pour my own cup of tea. She reminds me, without needing to say so, that today of all days, it is important also to eat lots of cake.

II Constituting SWIG Ireland: Community, Social Capital and Academic Citizenship

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The articles in this collection are the result of the editors' suggestion of further expanding the dialogue I, the author, had with other contributors in this 'Commentary' section of *Irish Geography*, at the Conference of Irish Geographers in University College Cork in 2017. The topic of the roundtable discussion was the role of women in Irish academia. In this paper, I will use a community organising approach to sketch out a model by which women-centred organisations can achieve a form of 'co-active power' (Stall and Stoecker, 2008, 244), a 'communal democracy' (Garber, 2008, 295) to sustain their support in academia over the long term, by using *Supporting Women in Geography* (SWIG) Ireland as a case study. My argument is that women's work in academia as well as in community organising are both, to an extent, an example of invisible, devalued labour (Daniels, 1987), as they contribute, often disproportionately, to student advising, mentoring, organising and more generally in service to the institution. People see the 'flashy demonstration' (Stall and Stoecker, 2008, 241), not knowing the many hours of preparation required to build relationships and provide for members' needs. Rather, it is women's 'ideal of care' (Gilligan, 2003, 62) that makes them good 'campus citizen[s]' (Burton, 1997, xii), manifesting strong commitment to academia and articulating a set of values and priorities which are consistent with those espoused in university mission statements. Yet, this work is often ignored, and it is more difficult to be measured as opposed to traditional performance indicators that currently characterises academic life. Furthermore, the current climate of structural change and funding cuts, makes women's access to academic progression even more vulnerable.

Ensuring women's full participation in academic consultative processes is more essential than ever. In accordance with Macfarlane, it is time now to recognise the 'gendered nature' (2007) of academic citizenship whose membership to the community also implies duties deriving from kinship in reciprocation of the benefits that membership brings. In this light, the potential capacity of communities to gain representation and resources, to achieve goals (intellectual, professional, and personal) and provide collective goods presents a different way of thinking that might address this oversight. To this end, I will outline the assumptions of the women-centred community organising model, the social capital that is involved, and the range of activities for empowering women to alter Irish academia.

An emergent, women-centred community in the Irish academia

When I was asked to participate in the first SWIG session at the 2017 Conference of Irish Geographers, I took some time to ask myself how I would personally answer the question of supporting and empowering women in academia. Based on my professional practice and involvement in a participatory research project conducted in Dublin's inner-city Liberties area[1] I have had the opportunity to work with households that experience socio-economic and cultural marginalisation. The Liberties has a long history and contemporary reality of impoverishment, yet in recent decades has also been a site of intense urban restructuring. In this context, I examined the intersections of affect, solidarity and community forms of support in the lived manifestations of crisis and resistance to gentrification enacted by women. They have played a role in creatively and effectively organising residents' activism in public housing communities. At the Oliver Bond flats, a core study-site for the research, I observed Oliver Bond's women organise to assist families in making ends meet, or provide child care, fund-raising for children's summer trips, run community meetings, mediating between local institutions (schools, social services, medical care, parishes) and fostering all sort of relationships that form the backbone of social capital in urban communities.

I therefore reflected on the work of community development (DeFilippis and Saegert, 2008) and associated tools, strategies, institutional arrangements to fight for the welfare in distressed neighbourhoods. These communities are 'places of interdependence' (DeFilippis and Saegert, 2008, 1) where people encounter 'fragmentation, difference, challenge, and affirmation, cooperation, and support' (DeFilippis and Saegert, 2008, 4), in which more democratic and inclusive forms of society can emerge. They effectively organise themselves into units of collective action (Tilly, 1973), as an application of a community's pooled resources to a common end. In this case, I am arguing that women in academia use this collective capacity to provide a supportive and engaging academic environment, which addresses gender and other intersectional inequalities in geography, in an Irish context. Through these actions of collective organising, communities provide solidarity, emerging from what many have termed 'social capital' (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988a, 1988b, 1990; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993, 2000). Social capital is created when the structure of relations among persons facilitates action; in this sense, 'social capital is a social good embodied in the relations among persons and positions' (Sampson, 2008, 168).

Indeed, women play the central role in social capital processes. However, their leadership often 'lacks visibility and legitimacy' as Warren *et al.* (2001, 19) observed. Rather than focusing on individual rights, women-centred organisers view justice as a practical reciprocity in the network of relationships that make up the community (Stall and Stoecker, 2008). Particularly, it is this orientation towards the collective which defines the idea of a 'co-active power' (Stall and Stoecker, 2008, 244) based on a collective developmental process that emphasises relationship building and integrates public and private spheres, in turn provoking community empowerment. In the women-centred

community organising model, the creation of a safe community environment for people to develop, change, and grow, is therefore more significant than engaging in conflict to gain institutional power (Kaplan, 1983).

One example of a safe environment is SWIG Ireland. SWIG serves as a free space. In 2016, an initial group of scholars based at Maynooth University[2] created an informal networking group where staff and postgraduate students would discuss the particularities and hardships of being a woman in academia, and in geography specifically. From these informal meetings, in September 2016, SWIG organised its first panel discussion[3] to address issues that surround female geographers and also to discuss how to get organised in Irish academia. They took advantage of the network to: (a) decide what was valuable to the members; (b) establish a communication and network engagement plan; and (c) to articulate demand to mobilise for collective action. The ongoing volunteer work of women scholars organised in different themed committees over the last two years has assured SWIG's continued participation. In 2017, at the Conference of Irish Geographers, SWIG Ireland's first constitution was approved by members of SWIG. Free spaces such as these exist because women have gained skills and self-confidence to develop the community further, as is reported on the SWIG webpage of the Geographical Society of Ireland[4].

> *We want SWIG Ireland to be useful to women, to be a way to show solidarity, support and advice. We also want SWIG Ireland to be a positive tool in recognising the diverse perspectives that women can bring to geographical and societal debate. The key to this ethos is the idea that women are not alone and that collectively women and men can have a powerful impact on institutional change.*

In the process of constituting SWIG, a development of members' empowerment occurred on the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels 'where the person develops a sense of personal power, an ability to affect others, and an ability to work with others to change the social institutions' (Gutierrez, 1990, 150). The literature on empowerment, in fact, suggests that the following psychological changes and modes of interventions were relevant in the making of SWIG: increasing self-efficacy as a belief in one's ability; developing group consciousness; reducing self-blame; assuming personal responsibility for change; development of a collaborative helping relationship and small-group work modality; teaching specific skills for community or organisational change, 'life skills' such as parenting, job seeking, self-defence, and interpersonal skills, such as assertiveness, social competency, and self-advocacy. The organising process of SWIG proved how there is less separation between organisers and leaders in the women-centred model. Particularly the initial founders of the group were closely linked to the SWIG task force with whom they worked and acted as facilitators of the empowerment process, using existing local networks to develop social groups and activities, thus creating a sense of communal consciousness. Meetings were organised in small groups to better establish trust, to create a safe and nurturing space (Gutierrez, 1990), building 'a sense of significance and solidarity [which is] so integral to community' (Stall and Stoecker, 2008, 246).

Towards an inclusive academic citizenship

Through women leadership the SWIG network created a space for the development of a collective identity, providing the social base for the mobilisation of women in geography as a political force within the Irish academic community. However, according to Lopez and Stack (2001), to construct an alternative potential space or public sphere in which the needs, interests, and identities of women in geography could be collectively recast in 'empowering ways' (Lopez and Stack, 2001, 46) three steps should be included in an agenda: cultural bridging, civic capacity-synergy, and inclusive citizenship. The objective of the cultural bridge is to facilitate the development of knowledge and skills that will help SWIG members to overcome social-cultural obstacles. Within the many functions of the cultural bridge, SWIG has already created 'a safe space in which to decode and translate the culture of power' (Lopez and Stack, 2001, 47) to eventually gain access to the networks of targeted mainstream-dominant institutions. Here, a civic capacity approach comes into play for the creation of those 'webs of alliances and interactions' (Lopez and Stack, 2001, 50) critical to alter the balance of power that enables marginalisation. Finally, the concept of citizenship or, in our case, of academic citizenship, might offer an interesting perspective through which to construct political identities and social consciousness that empowers women in geography to act. If SWIG members are going to develop effective power and change in Irish academia, the roles of women as community leaders must be appreciated and fully developed through cultural practices that organise the daily activities of scholars.

As I have discussed before, the ideal of care is 'an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone' (Gilligan, 2003, 62). Such academic 'duty' of engaging with different audiences, authoring, leading, tutoring, mentoring, organising, representing, reviewing, sharing materials for teaching and research, place an unequal burden on women in the Academy. The findings of a research conducted on this matter by Macfarlane (2007) show the difficulty of measuring service citizenship-type activities as opposed to research outputs such as the number of publications or grants attracted, although many institutions do acknowledge aspects of this role in their reward and recognition criteria, but not sufficiently 'to do justice' to the range of activities undertaken. As the author observed, academic citizenship is central to the success of the university as a collective entity and if universities fail to take up this challenge it will make it harder to maintain the quality of service activities and, ultimately, 'public support and understanding for the role of higher education in a free society' (Macfarlane, 2007, 271).

Since the first SWIG meeting it has been clear that 'daily survival' in Irish academia is not enough. To 'get ahead', to make the transition from survival to broader collective action, a more stable, formal institution, high in social capital as well as a more fluid support group is needed to bond and cultivate participation. According to Putnam, 'social capital promises no "magic bullet" for solving problems of social injustice' (Putnam, 2001, xvi). However, strong community ties are a prerequisite for those academic reforms aimed at greater social justice. The case of the SWIG constitution demonstrates the roles

that women play in generating a community and using social capital based on a needs-centred programme and open styles of leadership. A 'community' culture in academic life might be capable of building a network infrastructure so necessary to provide useful communication channels, and setting social norms for academics to constitute themselves as citizens. Networks will be able to recognise, debate, and deal with differences of interest so as to promote effective democracy (Saegert, 2003) and women's legitimation of claims in the Irish academia.

III The feminist fork in the road: Focusing on mentoring as support and strategy in the absence of magical insights for getting more men 'on board'.

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After participating in a SWIG panel at the Conference of Irish Geographers 2017 in Cork, I was invited to contribute a piece to this special discussion piece. I have started and restarted this piece several times. I did this because it is a tall assignment – an important one, and one that I do not take lightly. It is a tricky but critical task to author a feminist mentoring-related piece alongside impressive colleagues, and also amidst greater awareness of gender-related issues and challenges in academia.

Also, so much has changed since 2017, and certainly not all of it for the better, in terms of gender-related developments on campuses and beyond. I have struggled to write this because I find it vital to share hopeful, uplifting stories in these dark times. Over the last two years, however, I have not always had an immediate positive outlook. Every time I came back to write, other undesirable news stories were dominating the airwaves/webpages/scholarly domains, impacting my outlook and what spilled out onto the screen.

As the result of all of this and related experiences, I have also had a conflicting pair of dominant thoughts plaguing my feminist brain with increasing loudness. On repeat, they sound like this:

Men are important, and they must be part of improving gender relations and society – this is not the work of women and other marginalised genders alone; we cannot and *should not* do it alone. We must get men 'on board' if any real progress is to be made;

and

Burn it down. And by using that catch phrase, I mean that *it* (generalised, satisfactory and expedient progress on gender-related issues and gender relations within current systems and structures) is NOT working, at least not quickly enough and not substantially enough for many of us. In our academic and activist work, we seem to be swimming in circles and largely preaching to the converted (other feminist scholars, practitioners, and social justice activists) – and we are getting tired and angry. So, perhaps it IS simply time for something drastic, like scrapping everything, especially male authority and dominance, and starting again (aka burning it down)?

Men are important…

Burn it down…

Men are important…

Burn it down…

Men are important…
Burn it down…

What I find most perturbing now, close to two years after participating in the inspiring SWIG panel on feminism and mentoring in the academy at the CIG linked to this volume, is that I can clearly see the second option gaining ground, not only in my own head, but more broadly. The second option seems to be quite mainstream now, in fact. I also find myself wondering, with some frequency, what happens when a LOT of women get VERY angry. To date, I do not know what will result from this growing disbelief, anger, and upset, but I think that we may find out soon.

In a recent economic geography class that I taught, I used the phrase '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*' (the more it changes, the more it stays the same) to get students thinking about and discussing progress that we have (and have not) made on gender equity, and particularly gender pay parity. Despite progress and a LOT of work largely done by women and LGBTQ++ activists, scholars, labour union members, and others, there is still a LOT of work to be done around the world, as we all know. And this is one of the evidence-based realisations that lands me back at that dreaded feminist fork in the road, asking if/how we can *substantially* improve gender relations, gender equity, and society more broadly without men 'on board'.

I have made frequent stops at this fork in the road over the last twenty years or so and I must admit that now more frequently than before, I too am tempted to signal turning towards 'burn it down'.

Whenever I feel that way, my heart is heavy and my pedagogical soul is troubled, since I believe in transformative pedagogy. I have encountered brilliant and progressive male students and colleagues at every institution I have spent time with, just as I have experienced oppressive, nasty women upholding the patriarchy. But… my increasing indecision at that troublesome feminist fork in the road has, of late, been influenced by recent experiences I have had since co-founding **Inspiring Women Among Us (IWAU)**. My involvement in creating and running IWAU was, in fact, what precipitated my participation in the SWIG panel at the CIG in Cork.

My colleague, Dr Annie Booth, and I started IWAU in 2015 as a way to have an explicit, extended conversation on gender and gender relations leading up to the Canadian *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women* (usually marked on the December 6th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre – a day in 1989 when fourteen women were killed for being women, feminists, and seeking a university education). At our home institution, the University of Northern British Columbia, we mark the day in November, before the academic term ends, to encourage awareness and attendance. When we started IWAU, we were channeling my 'burn it down'-type anger into something more positive. We aimed to mark that sombre December 6th occasion with increased attendance, but also to get other issues, problems, and persistent barriers out in public discussions more attention, via a diverse series of activities (46+ activities in 2018 alone!). We also wanted to celebrate inspiring women and girls (historic and

contemporary), and their achievements, and to create unique spaces and opportunities for community interactions and mentoring, across genders. Since 2015, we have reached many of our initial goals. We have official City and University support and funding, we have been successfully funded by three large national grants in a row, and have attracted regular and return attendances of 1,000+ in the last two years. According to both formal and informal feedback, IWAU participants *do* find its activities particularly meaningful. And that's how we come back to the fork in the road.

One of our main goals in starting IWAU was to increase attendance at the December 6th commemorative ceremony. For three out of four years, we have done this – cracking 100+ attendees, before slipping down to about 80 this year. A second specific goal was to increase male attendance at the ceremony. We have done that too, with this year's attendance at the ceremony being the most male audience in recent history. By contrast, we are experiencing real difficulties in drawing men to the rest of our IWAU events of ALL types, whether plays, films, or talks in existing colloquia series. This, despite frenzied chanting/printing of 'all genders welcome' via posters, media spots, and social media advertising. Not for the first time, some of our events drew zero to a handful of men. And so… we return to the fork in the road and wonder what we should do next, and why? We also worry about the costs (professional, social, financial, and otherwise) of both paths leading away from the fork.

Recently, we returned to this discussion as part of our post-IWAU 2018 debriefings and our early IWAU 2019 planning meetings. In fact, we put 'the feminist fork in the road' on our first official 2019 meeting agenda. We again addressed whether we should: (i) simply worry less about men, and keep doing what we are doing successfully, catering to our participants; or (ii) bend more fully (as women are frequently socialised to do) to attract and maintain more male participation at IWAU? In the end, we decided to give it another (last?) try, and to make the 2019 theme *Masculinities, making space, & moving forward*.

This was not an easy choice to make. Frequently ending up back at the fork is also frustrating and tiring, particularly if you care about your gender diverse community, and you have invested a lot of time and energy in repeatedly trying, without much luck, to get men 'on board' in greater numbers. It is also a particularly depressing project if you truly believe that you have been inclusive and considerate of men's needs and preferences along the way, without much of their direct input, despite prodding. For example, we chose our first fundraising IWAU T-shirt design quite carefully, with special attention to a design that would also appeal to men. Upon choosing a gender-inclusive black T with white lettering, we were told by a male colleague that it was too bad that we did not have a shirt for 'them'. We were also instructed to be 'less radical' after naming an event 'Wine, Women, & Song', a name that we viewed as generally pleasing and marketing-oriented. Despite all of this, we will steer away from 'burn it down' and towards addressing masculinities head on in 2019.

Finding a relevant theme and planning a suite of activities is not the only work that goes into IWAU, however. IWAU has had many successes and accolades, and most importantly, we know from formal and informal feedback that we are making significant

impacts in people's lives. Still, we are growing tired of some of the efforts associated with keeping IWAU alive. To keep our series of events low to no barrier, we work hard to fully fund the costs. The constant fundraising efforts required of us to keep our series of events, our organisation, and our related award afloat place significant demands and stresses upon us. It is not the work that we have to do to raise funds that is problematic but rather persistent challenges in competing for funds and friends. We live in a small city in an outlying region where decision-making, political power and financial resources rest primarily with male control. Culturally, we do not seem to attract as much financial support (corporate or individual) as other awards and community events despite evidence that we are doing 'good work' and that our core goals align with community values and types of progress desired. The F-word (feminism) remains somewhat of a repellent for another F-word (finances), and this is a significant barrier to long term sustainability.

I want to bridge this perennial feminist dilemma of the fork in the road with real material consequences on the ground that ultimately, can influence the long-term success of IWAU and other efforts like it. These consequences help to explain, I think, how/why many of us end up back at that fork, agonising over which direction to choose.

Along with a burgeoning literature on mentorship, gender, and the academy, our IWAU series of events and the SWIG panel at the CIG in Cork (2017), indicate a strong appetite for vastly improved mentoring of women in the workplace. With this in mind, I end with questions we must ponder and discuss, both as mentors and mentees, to help us escape the feminist fork in the road, one way or another:

Can we improve mentor availability and related training in academia, as well as reducing gendered attrition in career progression without men 'on board'?

How will events such as IWAU and others like it achieve sound, long-term financing without greater support from men (who still hold the majority of institutional and private 'purse strings', as well as public and private leadership positions)?

Can women work together to effectively compensate for a lack of male participation (including male financial contributions), and should we be strengthening networks and resources with the goal of generating and growing alternative infrastructure and capital as we prepare to 'burn it down'?

Can we truly improve workplace conditions and humane treatment of each other in workplaces such as university campuses without men 'on board' given demographics, particularly of university administration? If so, how? And if not, what next?

These are just a few of the questions that lie before us and many others stuck at the feminist fork in the road. I do not have the answers, but I do have one compelling suggestion – that we keep this fork in the road in mind when we are talking about feminism, mentoring, and the academy. We must also ask:

How is this fork impacting mentoring and mentoring-related resources?

Is our mentoring acknowledging this fork and are we adequately equipping women, men, and others to get beyond this fork, for the greater good?

Do we, in fact, need to 'burn it down' or can we upset current gender-related imbalances by using mentoring to find windows and ways to better understand, influence, and re-direct gender relations?

Perhaps a reconfiguration of how we conceive of mentorship is a start. It is feminist to suggest that mentoring can occur both horizontally or laterally and upwards, rather than only raining down from a top position. A more flexible view of mentorship, the forms it can take, and the relationships it can foster has the potential to positively impact gender relations and other uneven power dynamics, changing society for the better. True, diverse, and dynamic mentorship may be one way to reduce the need to violently 'burn it down'. It may also give us more paths to choose from at the feminist fork in the road, and that is no small contribution.

While facing tough decision-making at the fork in the road, it is important for one's mental health, if not for some pending revolution, to feel well-resourced about how to understand the present, and prepare for the future. To close, I would like to emphasise inspiration that I find in this volume, in SWIG Ireland, and the Irish academy. First, this special issue was conceived with the very goals of sharing key information and building bridges between female academics and allies trying to change cultures of research, scholarship, activism, and information. Second, SWIG Ireland has built what began as an informal group into a growing web of international support, critique, celebration, and sharing. This achievement adds to alternative leadership and mentoring desperately needed by women around the world. I am grateful for Irish colleagues that I can learn from and collaborate with. Recently, the Canadian government has been consulting with campus groups across the country about a proposed 'made in Canada' version of Athena Swan. My interactions with SWIG Ireland informed my participation in that consultation.

In terms of Irish contributions more generally, the world was watching the surge of reassuringly feminist and vocal activism that infused the lead-up to the recent abortion referendum. Seeing Irish streets come alive with all ages, genders, and races in support of expanding women's legal reproductive rights was invigorating, particular at a time when North America is seeing reproductive rights legislation under extreme threat in many places.

The Irish academy also has a lot to offer to academics and others trying to better understand gender as it relates to space, place, and identity. In the last ten years, *Irish Geography* has included articles on gender and: farming; urban spaces; Irish identity; employment; health; and immigration – among other topics. Irish scholars, and scholarship about Ireland include both older studies on gender, sexuality and identity (e.g., Nash, 1997), and newer studies about masculinity and breadwinning (e.g., Ralph, 2018). While not all gender-related Irish research is feminist, all studies provide insights of use for dealing with the fork in the road.

Most inspiring to me, however, were all of the young Irish geographers that I met while attending the CIG in Cork (2017) – they were both building on the work of others *and* bringing new perspectives when they presented on gender and mentoring; perceptions of the environment; environmental stewardship; activism; and the environment-health nexus. Their perspectives, analyses, and calls for action helped to quell the 'burn it down' voice inside me, by suggesting forks in the road that I had not fully seen.

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Endnotes

[1] Research project hosted at the Geography Department of Maynooth University (supervisor Dr Sinead Kelly) and funded by the Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme (grant number GOIPD/2015/518).

[2] Organised by Professor Karen Till and doctoral students Rachel Mc Ardle, Aoife Delaney and Lorna O' Hara.

[3] Participants comprised Professor Anna Davies from TCD, Dr Niamh Moore Cherry from UCD, myself, Louise Collins Sarsfield and Prof. Gerry Kearns (as chair) from Maynooth University.

[4] http://www.geographicalsocietyireland.ie/supporting-women-in-geography.html, accessed on March 2018.