The xCHANGE festival. Small x, big CHANGE?

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on xCHANGE, a month-long festival marking International Women's Day (IWD) at Birmingham City University, UK. The author first problematises expectations of International Women's Day, then outlines the origins of the festival, detailing both practical aspects and programme content. The chapter then considers the festival through a lens of 'power geometry' (Massey 1993) in which female academics are positioned in distinct ways in relation to flows and interconnections of power within the university. Does the xCHANGE festival disrupt or merely reflect this power geometry? Does it create conditions for women to thrive in academia?

Keywords

festival, International Women's Day, gender, power, academy

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Introduction

This chapter reflects on xCHANGE, a month-long festival marking International Women's Day (IWD) at Birmingham City University, UK. I founded and directed the festival in 2019 and curated it again in 2020. I submitted the proposal for this chapter shortly after xCHANGE 2019 and started drafting the chapter when preparations for xCHANGE 2020 were in full swing. I am writing the chapter while in lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic having cut the 2020 festival short halfway through. Interesting times, interesting timing! I now have the opportunity to reflect on two iterations of the festival and to offer some practical guidance to others. However, this chapter also considers the festival through a lens of 'power geometry' (Massey 1993) in which female academics are positioned in distinct ways in relation to flows and interconnections of power within the university. Does the xCHANGE festival disrupt or merely reflect this power geometry? Does it create conditions for women to thrive in academia? To address these questions, I first consider the institution of IWD and problematise expectations about 'celebration'. I then describe the origins of the xCHANGE festival and detail both practical aspects and programme content. I reflect on the evolution of xCHANGE from 2019 to 2020, including a change to my own role. In the closing section, I consider the xCHANGE festival in terms of power, space and gender and the implications for women in the academy.

But first, a note about me. I am a White British, cis-female, interdisciplinary social sciences researcher at a post-1992 UK university. I specialise in critical higher education (HE) studies, gender and inequalities. I am also the university's lead for the Athena SWAN Charter, the higher education sector's charter mark for gender equality in the UK. Established in 2005 as a mechanism to advance the careers of academic women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM), the Athena SWAN Charter now addresses gender equality more broadly and across all academic disciplines (Advance HE 2020). The Charter was adopted in the Republic of Ireland in 2015 and Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) began piloting an adapted STEMM-only version in 2016. Perhaps unusually, I work 'critically *on* gender, drawing on geographical, sociological and educational concepts and methods … and *in* gender overseeing and implementing activities in relation to the sector's flagship accreditation system' (Carruthers Thomas 2019, p187). I call myself a feminist and I concur with the critique of the Athena SWAN Charter as an example of 'moderate feminism ie: focusing on changing structures sufficiently to increase the success of individual women within the context of existing institutions' (Tzanakou and Pearce 2019). I try to use my academic role to bring active criticality to my diversity work, to maintain the visibility of continued structural inequalities within the academy.

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'Celebrating' International Women's Day

IWD has a long history. The Socialist Party of America first organised a 'Women's Day' in New York on 28 February 1909 and Soviet Russia introduced a national holiday on 8 March in 1917, after women gained suffrage. IWD has since been adopted by socialist, feminist and internationalist movements across the world, although what it means and how it is marked varies widely, depending on national context. The IWD website states: 'International Women's Day is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating women's equality' (2020). 8 March has become a key diversity date in the UK university calendar (others include LGBT History Month and Black History Month) and there is an expectation that it will be 'celebrated'. Events typically feature high-profile female speakers, successful alumna, book launches, discussions of 'women's' history and contemporary issues, cultural celebrations or social gatherings. Some UK universities have moved to a week of IWD-badged events aimed at staff, students and the public. Hosts can purchase an IWD 'event pack' from the IWD website which includes purple-themed posters, postcards, bunting, wristbands, pens and balloons. Whatever the activity, female visibility is raised and the mood is determinedly positive.

When I arrived at Birmingham City University in July 2015, a central Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit had yet to be established. Prior to 2019, IWD events tended to be small-scale and localised across our four faculty, multi-campus institution. In 2017, I tried my hand at an IWD Pop-Up Reading Room, with displays on women's history and contemporary research. In 2018, a colleague, Professor Diane Kemp and I ran an IWD Big Read throughout the day. Staff and students were invited to sign up to read aloud for 15 minutes from the work of their chosen female author. These events were enjoyable and successful in a limited way, attracting the usual suspects: overwhelmingly self-identifying as female, largely academic. I had no great enthusiasm for jumping on the annual IWD bandwagon. I am wary of the potential tokenism of one-off events raising temporary visibility for any disadvantaged group and given the glacial rate of progress in gender equality across the globe, the determination to 'celebrate' women's achievements rings hollow. Our universities are keen on good news stories; on corporate narratives which secure the institution as 'a site of authenticity … singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity (Massey 1994, p5). Yet the higher education (HE) sector is stubbornly and overwhelmingly White, middle-class and at senior level, male-dominated (Advance HE 2020, Jarboe 2018). A university may announce its commitment to women's equality on 8 March, but on 9 March, when the purple balloons have deflated, what has actually changed for the women who work there?

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My argument is that university IWD celebrations risk being '"institutional speech acts" which do not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and are non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised' (Ahmed 2006, p.764). Moreover, I would argue that *not* to tell stories of inequality, anger, pain and structural disadvantage within and without the walls of the academy is to be complicit in institutional polishing, 'the labour of creating shiny surfaces resulting in the fabrication of a 'textual account' of diversity through which an organisation can reflect back a good image to itself' (Ahmed 2017, p. 102).

xCHANGE 2019: starting points

My thoughts turned to IWD 2019 in late 2018.   At that time, the yawning gender pay gap and #MeToo were in the news, but Brexit swamped UK media coverage. For those living elsewhere, it may be difficult to imagine how Brexit dominated our lives between 2016-2020, leading up to and following the EU membership referendum in June 2016. The UK had experienced an ugly tribal division between Remainers and Leavers, with faultlines emerging between families, friends and communities. It was forecast that women would be hit hardest by the threatened 'no deal' Brexit. Brexit also had serious implications for the academy: for research funding and collaboration and for the futures of European academics in UK universities. In late 2018, the UK was on a cliff edge leading up to the planned exit date, 31 March 2019. I didn't feel like celebrating, but here's what I *did* want to do. I wanted to engage with the implications of Brexit for women, academic and otherwise. I wanted to reflect the university in its local context, a diverse, multi-disciplinary institution in a superdiverse city. I wanted to reflect the depth, complexity and radicalism of research taking place in our Faculties; to hear about women's lived experiences, ideas and expertise. I wanted to talk about bad news as well as good.

The idea of a festival came to me in October 2018. Every autumn, my home city Sheffield hosts a month-long literature festival: *Off The Shelf*. I had picked up a festival programme, a thick booklet, crammed with a diverse collection of literary events and had bought a ticket to attend an event featuring a lecture and book signing by Helen Pankhurst, feminist activist, great-granddaughter of Emmeline Pankhurst and granddaughter of Sylvia Pankhurst, leaders of the suffragette movement. 2018 marked the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which enabled some women over the age of 30 to vote for the first time. Pankhurst's book, *Deeds Not Words* (2018) charts the changes in the lives of women over the last century. The book's title recalls the Suffragettes' slogan, 'a demand for action, not just placating promises of equality in due course'

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(ibid.) The Sheffield venue was packed. Pankhurst was articulate, quietly passionate and utterly convincing. As I listened to her speak, the festival programme resting on my lap, I decided a festival framework for IWD 2019 at Birmingham City University could counter the high-speed treadmill of the academy and allow space for extended conversations. So confident was I in this idea that when I approached Helen Pankhurst to sign a copy of her book, I asked her whether she would come and speak at our festival! She gave me her card and told me to make contact.

Kickstarting the festival was initially straightforward, thanks to the fact I have one foot in my academic Faculty and the other in Athena SWAN, which involves working with academics, professional services staff and senior management. As a result, I have developed strong networks across the university, a definite advantage in this situation - as was my budget for equalities work. Even so, the prospect of programming a month-long festival was intimidating and as usual, my first step was to consult others. I called an open meeting (with a free lunch) at our City Campus to gather suggestions and expressions of interest. The usual suspects attended: fellow feminists, diversity leads, members of Athena SWAN teams, supportive colleagues - but others too, including representatives of the student body and professional services staff. There was great enthusiasm for the idea of a festival. Ahmed writes 'Diversity workers can often find people within the organisation … who can build a momentum or even a countermomentum, that is, a momentum to counter … "institutional inertia"' (2017 p.97). This was certainly the case with xCHANGE. An informal working group evolved including my co-conspirator on The Big Read 2018, Professor Diane Kemp and several local leads in Faculties and at South Campus. Existing projects and centres also expressed their interest in being involved. These included the VQ Collective, a women's sexual health and pleasure project; the facilitators of the university's Menopause Café and the Centre for Brexit Studies.

xCHANGE 2019: the festival

By the end of November 2018, we had a skeleton programme and a name for the festival: xCHANGE, emphasising changes that have taken place and those that still need to happen to advance women's equality. We also had a festival strapline: 'A month of presentation, provocation and participation to mark International Women's Day'. The creation of a festival visual identity was taken on as a 'live project' by three second-year female Visual Communication undergraduates with me as their 'client'. Somehow these young women managed to turn my rambling ideas and impulses into superb designs for a logo, banners, social media channels and of course, the festival brochure. The forthcoming expiration of the burgundy EU passport and the production (in France!)

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of a blue UK passport to replace it, was a hot topic of conversation at the time and together the design team and I hatched a plan for a Festival Passport, a passport-sized, watermarked booklet, containing the festival programme, key information, feature pages and stunning original artwork. The team also designed a stamp featuring the festival logo. Festival goers would be able to collect a stamp in their passport for each event they attended. I was taken aback by the maturity, talent and *professionalism* of this student design team. Their work was just one example of the way students were centrally involved in key aspects of the festival.

I structured the programme into three categories: core, big hitters and local, cross-cut by three themes. *The Personal Is Political* recalled the feminist rallying cry of the 1960s and 1970s. Events in this strand highlighted the politics of identity and inequality in spheres of technology, health, society, media and cultural industries and political life. *Seen and Unseen: Trailblazers, Campaigners and Activists* paid tribute to the centenary of suffrage but also to contemporary women's work going on above and below the radar. *Where's the S in HE?* focused on experiences, challenges and achievements of women in HE, as employees, researchers and leaders. By January 2019 the programme included 40 separate events.

- The core programme provided the festival's narrative thread, from launch to finale. It featured The IWD Big Read on Friday 6 March, permanent exhibitions and displays in university libraries and School of Media and a substantial seminar and workshop series. The workshops focused on extending and enriching existing Athena SWAN activity, including two academic writing sessions, *Media Coaching for Expert Women* and '*What's Athena SWAN Got To Do With Me*?' a men-only discussion about engagement with the Athena SWAN agenda.
- The big hitters category featured invited speakers including Helen Pankhurst, booked for the festival finale; Professor Michelle Ryan presenting her work on the glass cliff (Ryan and Haslam); Preet Kaur Gill, the first UK Sikh female MP and feminist criminologists Dr Charlotte Barlow and Dr Stephanie Kewley presenting groundbreaking work on improving responses to domestic and sexual violence.
- I took overall responsibility for organising the core and big hitters categories (booking speakers, rooms and catering and setting up Eventbrite pages for registration etc), but the local programme empowered multiple 'owners' on both campuses and in all Faculties and Services to organise events for specific audiences under the xCHANGE umbrella. These included a Midwifery seminar raising awareness of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a

concert *Early Music Treasures*, celebrating 17th and 18th female composers at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and a staff picnic in the School of Architecture and Design.

I've included further details of five selected activities/events to give a flavour of the festival

- **Show the Sash**.
  In 2018, Big Read participants donned a (rather makeshift) sash in Suffragette colours as they read the work of their chosen author, passing it on to the next reader. In 2019 a final year Design for Performance undergraduate serendipitously doing her dissertation and final project on the topic of Suffragettes, created a unique festival sash, embroidered with historical and contemporary slogans relating to women's rights. It was Diane's idea to ''show the sash' throughout the festival; staff and students would book it out for the day, wear it in class, in meetings and around campus to raise awareness of suffrage, women's rights and the festival. Each 'sasher' was required to take a selfie and post it to the festival Twitter feed @xCHANGE2019. Over 25 individuals (including four males), booked to Show the Sash. It also made an appearance at multiple festival events, including the finale, when it was worn by Helen Pankhurst.

- **Festival Launch and 'Ain't I A Woman?'**
  xCHANGE was launched at a reception addressed by Professor Alison Honour, Pro-Vice Chancellor and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Design and Media. The launch was in tandem with the opening of an exhibition of jewellery and objects created by School of Jewellery undergraduates on the International Women's Day theme. The exhibition's title Ain't I A Woman? was also the title of a stunning work created by one of the students which also appeared on the exhibition's poster. All the exhibiting students attended the launch and several spoke publicly about creating their pieces. The exhibition continued throughout the festival.

- **Frozen Out of the Debate/Brexit and Emotions**
  The university's Centre for Brexit Studies co-hosted a Brexit seminar double-bill. The first featured a guest speaker discussing the marginalisation of women's voices in EU elections, the second on the emotional impact of Brexit. The latter included a guided mindfulness session focusing on negativity and anger.

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- **Feminist Playlist**

  University staff and students were invited to submit their three selected tracks for the playlist subsequently curated by a staff/student duo. This was broadcast over two programmes on the student radio station Splash and was made available as a podcast.

- **Festival Finale**

  Diane Kemp, Professor of Broadcast Journalism interviewed Helen Pankhurst about the issues raised in her book Deeds not Words followed by a Q&A. The event closed with a joyful concert by a local community choir: In Her Shoes, who work with female refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham.

xCHANGE 2020

Many assumed xCHANGE would run again in 2020 and were keen that it should. I had mixed feelings. xCHANGE 2019 had been an extraordinary event, difficult to repeat. I was reluctant to reprise the huge workload again so soon, not least because I was now on the waiting list for hip replacement surgery. I didn't want to commit to the festival then have to withdraw at a crucial moment. I made it known I would be very happy for others to take on the festival and reshape it in whatever way they wished, but there was an absence of volunteers! In January 2020, I held another open meeting, which was well-attended with several new faces. I proposed two options: a return to a loose collection of one-off IWD events, or a hub and spoke festival model with some central administration (by me or A.N.Other) and distributed ownership of individual events under the xCHANGE umbrella. There was a clear preference for the latter option and several aspects of the festival returned by popular demand: The Big Read, Show The Sash, The Feminist Playlist and the Festival Passport.

While still involved as the central point of contact and spreadsheet queen, my role in xCHANGE 2020 was more curatorial than directorial. I still wrangled with budgets and catering but the xCHANGE 2020 Twitter account @XChange2020 became a significant part of my work. This publicised upcoming events, profiled key people and, once the festival began, live-Tweeted some events. I also developed a #womenofchange hashtag, highlighting women around the world whose work and activism were likely to be little known in the UK. The festival Twitter account had been essential in 2019 because it had been extremely difficult to get any coverage of the festival by the university's corporate communications office. My requests for coverage were repeatedly met by 'March is very

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busy'. I wonder whether the indifference may have stemmed from its independent character, or because there are no quick wins to report in women's equality, or perhaps because women talking (a lot) about inequality, discrimination, sexism, racism, domestic violence and FGM is too awkward a fit with a positive corporate narrative? Whatever the reason, when I invited corporate communications to cover the 2020 festival, I had no expectations that they would do so. However, following the 2019 festival's success, it seemed the university was now happy to 'own' xCHANGE 2020 and report it as a 'good news' story.

The hub and spoke model had produced a stripped back 2020 festival programme of 20 events with no official launch or finale. It was rewarding to observe the increased sense of recognition, ownership and even affection for the festival in its second year. One of the original festival design team, now a final year student, generously offered to refresh and reproduce the Festival Passport, which now that the UK had finally left the EU on 31 January 2020, had moved on from its Brexit origins to symbolise xCHANGE. As our sash-making student had graduated, four colleagues, from each of our four faculties, formed a Sash Working Group and created two sashes, one for each campus. Show the Sash was once more booked up within several days by staff and students from all Faculties and Services. There were other continuities. Both university libraries designed and ran exhibitions for a second year; In Her Shoes, the community choir which had performed at the 2019 festival finale, ran a singing workshop with staff and students and performed live at the festival's most ambitious event, a one day women's music festival at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire on 8 March. The programme also reflected developments within the university; the recently formed BCU Women's Professoriate hosted two seminars by members showcasing their work.

xCHANGE began on 1 March 2020. The coronavirus was already wreaking havoc in China and Italy when halfway through the festival's second week, the university instructed staff to postpone or cancel large gatherings and public events. That day, the festival event *STEM 4 All* had been due to welcome over 150 participants to the campus for an industry/academy diverse STEM careers showcase. Also cancelled that week was *Speaking for Ourselves: Contemporary Women's Poetry*, an evening celebration of women's poetry featuring headline poet Jacqueline Saphra, five Birmingham female poets and a Q&A with the editors of the literary journal *Poetry Birmingham*. On 13 March I announced on Twitter: 'The #coronavirus has proved a killer challenge to our month-long #festival. With all future events now postponed, let's celebrate the #collegiality #feminism #activism #energy of our first 2 weeks. Thanks to all involved! Stay well'. On 23 March, the UK finally went into lockdown.

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xCHANGE: power geometry

At the start of this chapter I outlined Massey's concept of 'power geometry', the differential positioning of groups and individuals in relation to flows and interconnections of power in particular spaces. I applied this to the positioning of female academics in distinct ways in relation to flows and interconnections of power within the academy. I use this as a lens now, to briefly consider whether xCHANGE disrupted or reflected the established power geometry in the university. To what extent did it create conditions for women to thrive?

xCHANGE was inevitably shaped by the power geometry of the university/academy and wider society. I have already noted the marginalisation of the 2019 festival by the corporate centre. In addition, while the majority of events were open to all staff, the majority of audiences and participants self-identified as female. There is of course, an argument for creating safe spaces for women, but where this is not the intention, lack of male participation in gender equality initiatives is a chronic issue. International Women's Day is too often, wrongly, perceived as 'women's business' and the Athena SWAN Charter has a similar image problem. Moreover, the vast majority of xCHANGE event organisers were female, giving time and effort above and beyond their paid roles. Again, this is a classic pattern in equalities work, as if it is the job of a disadvantaged group to do the work of drawing attention to their disadvantage (and to finding solutions). The burden of gender equality work is added to the 'second shift' of domestic work and caring (Hochschild 1989) many women perform. Again, Athena SWAN faces similar criticism in the UK: female staff undertake a disproportionate amount of the work within universities (Tsouroufli 2019). When the work of the festival was done, there were no material differences to pay, precarity or maternity benefits. The work has little currency in the accounting system of the academy. This has longer-term negative implications for academic women in a career environment which prizes research performativity and narrow metrics of achievement. Why do it then?

> Within the organization there is a gap between words and deeds, between what
> organisations say they will do, or what they are committed to doing, and what they are
> doing. Diversity workers often live in this gap between words and deeds, trying to make
> organisations catch up with the words they send out.

> Ahmed 2017, p.107

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I think colleagues and students responded to the idea of xCHANGE as an opportunity to occupy that gap between words and deeds, to resist tokenism, raise their voices, make visible their experiences and expertise, support other women, perhaps even to thrive in that space. The resulting diversity of xCHANGE can be described as Massey describes space: 'as a simultaneity of stories so far' (2005: 130), conflicting, contradictory, always in flux. The programming of the festival throughout March deliberately resisted squeezing the issue of 'women's rights' into one prescribed day and maximized opportunities for a range of individuals and groups to organise and participate. xCHANGE was collegiate rather than corporate in character, involving staff and students, academics and professional services staff, community and external participants in active collaboration within multiple networks and spaces. Several collaborations were intergenerational, drawing on and reflecting women's experiences throughout different lifestages. Colleagues may have been motivated by frustration, anger, determination, passion, commitment. I was motivated to by a desire to avoid tokenism and to create meaningful exchanges about gender inequality. I think the festival enabled us all to experiment with reframing that power geometry, but it was a temporary disruption. Enduring empowerment and change require more sustained structural shifts in a gendered geography of power within the university and the sector at large.

xCHANGE 2021? It's too early to say. Oh, and I'm still waiting for that hip replacement!

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