

COMMENTARY

Beyond bearable: Gender equality and the benefits of systemic change in academia

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The focal article by Gabriel et al. (2023) provides a valuable overview on how department heads and other faculty members can support female scholars to navigate the complex demands of pregnancy, motherhood, and childcare in academia. However, we argue that these issues are rooted in wider academic and societal trends, and therefore need to be considered from a broader perspective. The focal article implies that work–life balance policy changes, combined with the goodwill and allyship of heads of departments and academic co-workers, will provide the much-needed solutions. Considering that many European countries have decent national regulations regarding maternity and parental leave in place, we make the case that, although policies are necessary for creating bearable situations and *do* work, they are not enough. In order to truly promote a “cultural shift that shatters the assumption that having a family is not compatible with academic success” (Gabriel et al., 2023, p. 2), we need to aim higher, beyond *bearable* and work toward changing the evaluation criteria and performance standards in the academic system itself. This would provide a more sustainable and, thus, effective strategy, that accounts for pressures and problems related to work acceleration and acknowledges the perspectives of different stakeholders, working mothers, working fathers, and childfree employees alike.

The focal article’s suggestions for supporting female scholars focus on individual level strategies within organizations, as the political system in the US does not provide decent regulations that protect their well-being and work–life balance. We argue that family-friendly policies, whether on the national, institutional, or departmental level, are necessary but not sufficient in tackling the problems outlined in the focal paper and often do not go further than making raising children bearable (e.g., making sure that women can properly recover from childbirth, being flexible about meeting times that accommodate caring responsibilities). But in order to make combining family and academic success a realistic option, more is needed. This is illustrated by the fact that despite family-friendly policies in many European countries (EU-average for paid maternity leave in 2022 was 21.1 weeks; OECD Family Database, 2022), systematic career disadvantages for female scholars are still highly prevalent. For instance, although in the Netherlands, 100% paid maternity leave of 16 weeks is mandated, and the government offers generous parental leave schemes and subsidized childcare for working parents, gender discrimination in academia prevails. Compared to other countries in the EU, the Netherlands has one of the lowest numbers of female full professors (She figures, 2021), and even after controlling for factors like age, job category, and career stage, women earned €53 less gross salary per month, amounting up to €438 for full professors (De Goede et al., 2016).

For substantial and sustainable change, we need to rethink regulations and norms in academia more fundamentally. Current evaluation criteria and performance standards in universities reward scholars for working long hours (e.g., which can be spent on publications and grants)

and punish those who object to those demands. This institutionalized logic typically advantages male scholars, as they are the ones who are able to do this in the first place, given that they spend much less time on care work (Allen et al., 2021). In this commentary, we want to go beyond suggestions for creating boundary conditions that enable female scholars to spend longer hours working (e.g., by sharing childcare responsibilities or providing more extensive daycare), so that they can eventually catch up with their male counterparts in the academic race. We suggest that we should additionally try to alleviate gender disparities by more systemic changes, such as redesigning academic performance criteria and rethinking academics' workload and work-life balance.

A call for more diversified academic careers and evaluation criteria

In this commentary, we aim to broaden the focal article's perspective by emphasizing the need to change the way we define and evaluate performance in academia. More diversified academic careers and evaluation criteria that rather focus on impact and contributions to society instead of publication metrics would allow scholars, irrespective of gender, to excel in the academic system despite family responsibilities. For example, even with restricted amounts of time, it would be possible to excel in one specific area that matches one's talents (e.g., academic leadership) or to create big impact with a small yet clever idea. Bringing value to one's organization and to society does not depend as much on the sheer number of working hours as one's score in publication metrics does. Promoting an academic culture where quality is more important than quantity, where contributions to society are recognized and rewarded, and where one does not need to excel in all areas (teaching, research, fund writing, management), would be beneficial for everyone. Furthermore, it would particularly benefit scholars who spend a considerable amount of time on caregiving activities.

The need to change traditional ideas about academic careers and evaluation criteria has recently been put forward by, among others, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands in an initiative called Recognition and Rewards (<https://recognitionrewards.nl/>). This initiative aims to improve the current assessment procedures of academics and claims that science and scholarship should not only be about the number of publications and journal impact factors but rather about creating room for everyone's talents. As part of the Recognition and Rewards initiative, the Dutch Research Foundation (NWO) has changed their funding application regulations. Instead of sending a traditional CV with a full list of publications, scholars are asked to send a narrative CV that is assessed on the basis of its inherent qualities and (sustainable) impact instead of quantity and prestige. In addition, some Belgian universities have started to promote alternative assessment procedures. Scholars' performance (including their tenure) is evaluated on the basis of a plan that academics formulate themselves, based on their own professional goals, their unique skills, values, and personal needs, and in conversation with their department heads and a tenure track committee. As a result of such a procedure, the quality of academic work benefits from academics' specific talents and interests, and scholars can maintain their health and well-being, and attend to other spheres of life such as the family. Our examples show that changing academic evaluation criteria is not a utopia but can in fact work despite the long and bumpy road ahead.

A call for less excessive academic performance standards and workload

This commentary also aims to broaden the focal article's perspective by emphasizing the need to change the way we think about work and life in academia in general. Today, academics are subjected to enormous pressure, unattainable standards, and excessive demands. Universities prioritize productivity above any other objective, such as the health and well-being of employees. Academics are expected to compete with each other (in terms of publications, research grants,

student evaluations) and focus on their own, individual academic success. Such expectations and pressures, combined with increasingly precarious and insecure forms of academic employment, cause mental health problems among academics at an alarming scale (Levecque et al., 2017), and these features of academic employment take their toll especially on women and other minoritized employees (Bal et al., 2019). However, offering temporary relief from these demands may delay but not solve the core problem. We may temporarily mitigate the excessive workload that cannot be reconciled with childcare and family, but as long as we don't change the academic culture that (re)produces such excessive workload and competition itself, we do not address the real issue, and it will keep on manifesting elsewhere and in other forms of suffering.

As experts in the psychology of workplaces, I-O psychologists can play a unique role in redesigning universities toward more humane and dignified workplaces. The Future of Work and Organizational Psychology network (<https://www.futureofwop.com/>), an international collective of WOP researchers, embarked on exactly this when they published the “Manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology” (Bal et al., 2019). In this manifesto, the researchers offer a set of recommendations and organizational practices that preserves and promotes the health and well-being of academics, with special attention to women and other minoritized groups. They advocate for new ways of organizing work that revolve around the principles of collaboration and inclusion instead of competition and individualism. They recommend redesigning teams in ways so that academics' skills can complement each other, instead of the current expectation academics face to excel in every area.

A call for cocreating sustainable academic workplaces in democratic ways

Although heads of departments indeed play an important role in how policies are interpreted and implemented in departments (Gabriel et al., 2023), overreliance on them may not solve women's difficulties in academic workplaces. Even though heads of departments may indeed be committed to more equal academic workplaces, they are deeply embedded in the academic hierarchy with its own logics and rules. Even if they have the goodwill and intention for change, they are nevertheless subjected to organizational imperatives. As long as these imperatives revolve around “delivering” ever increasing rates of productivity, they will always be at the expense of employees who are not able to deliver at that level because of childcare and family obligations. Furthermore, expecting change to come from heads of departments perpetuates a deeply hierarchical mental model regarding how work should be organized in universities. We may get lucky, if we have a helpful, empathic and egalitarian head of department, and we may get unlucky if we do not. If we let a good chunk of our hopes for fairer work conditions depend on our heads of departments, we recreate our dependent position in universities. Instead, we may realize our own agency and expertise in rethinking and redesigning sustainable academic workplaces, and cocreate them in democratic ways.

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