


COMMENTARY

Parental leave is just a wolf in sheep's clothing: A call for gender-aware policies in academia

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Gabriel et al. (2023) bring attention to an oft-discussed issue, women's caregiving and tenure/promotion in academia, and that one often precludes the other from success. Importantly and perhaps alluded to in the focal article, the challenge of caregiving for women in academia are conversations held in whispers and among our closest confidants, at least in the past. However, through largely women-led scholarship and raising their voices (in symposia and panel discussions) at some of our most prestigious conferences in the I-O psychology and management fields, these issues are starting to gain traction.

While we largely agree with Gabriel et al.'s (2023) call to action, we seek to draw attention to, and critique, their argument that caregiving policies (e.g., parental leave) are a panacea for addressing women's caregiving in academia. More specifically, Gabriel et al. (2023) correctly note that in the United States, an absence of appropriate caregiving policies places department chairs/heads and other faculty members as allies in enacting change to support women caregivers in the academy. However, we contend that policy *can be* addressed, that is university policies can be enacted and changed, and feminist economics offers an avenue with which to do so. We first describe feminist economics, and we then discuss university caregiving policies as gender-blind, challenging the arguments in the focal article that parental leave and tenure extension are vital to women's success. Finally, we conclude with steps for establishing gender awareness in university policies aimed at supporting caregiving, ending with suggestions for practical solutions. Importantly, we challenge Gabriel et al.'s (2023) call to action with the following battle cry: *universities must enact and/or change their policies to be gender-aware in order to support the advancement of their women caregivers*

Feminist economics

Feminist economics challenges neoclassical economic theory which focuses on supply and demand, primarily driven through the paid economy (i.e., one's ability to buy and sell is the only thing that matters). Neoclassical economics rejects the notion that unpaid work, including caregiving, is essential to economic prosperity, because it does not contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (Staveren, 2010). Because gender is not considered a critical component of economics under neoclassical thought, it is male-biased, as economic policies historically favor men, and

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the labor market is historically male-dominated (Staveren, 2010). Feminist economics, on the other hand, emphasizes that without women's labor, including unpaid care work, entire economic systems would fail (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, 2015). As such, feminist economics argues for gender awareness, or the recognition that women and men are constrained in different ways and therefore policies should reflect gendered realities (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, 2015). While feminist economics is largely examined in macro-contexts, organizations, as microcosms of society, are well suited to feminist economic scrutiny, including institutions of higher education. Notably, employing a feminist economic lens in the evaluation of caregiving policies in academia may illuminate both barriers to, and avenues for, change.

Gender-blind caregiving policies in the academy

Gender-blind policies are constructed on the premise that women and men are the same. On the surface, gender-blind caregiving policies are an attractive solution, as these policies are intended to allow parents to manage having both family and a career. However, feminist economics argues gender-blind policies are implicitly male-biased because they do not reflect the gendered realities of men and women, in so doing they uphold institutional structures which are largely patriarchal. In other words, gender-blind policies favor men in the distribution of opportunities and resources, often at the expense of women (Kabeer & Subrahmanian, 1996). In academia, parental leave, stop-the-clock, and other tenure extension policies which are meant to support caregiving are inherently and egregiously gender-blind. Gabriel *et al.* (2023) highlight the problem with these policies suggesting that parental leave and tenure extension policies meant to support caregiving may be used by men as a means to enhance their research and productivity. Anecdotally, many of us female academic caregivers know of men using caregiving policies to advance their research profiles. However, empirically, there is research to support this assertion. Specifically, research suggests that adopting gender-blind policies such as "stop-the-clock" *disadvantages* women and substantially increases the gender gap in tenure and/or promotion decisions (Antecol *et al.*, 2018); with evidence suggesting that the probability of men receiving tenure after implementation of stop-the-clock policies increased by 19 percentage points, whereas for women, the probability fell by 22 percentage points.

At this point, skeptical readers may be proclaiming that fathers are parents too, and therefore caregiving policies should also be used by men so that they may take an active role in caregiving. And while academia may offer many avenues for men and women, both, to engage in more egalitarian distributions of care due to flexibility, Gabriel *et al.* (2023) adeptly note that the focus of their manuscript is on women because "a disproportionate amount of caregiving falls to women." This reality was showcased throughout the pandemic with research suggesting that female academics were and still are, publishing less than men (Squazzoni *et al.*, 2021), largely because female academics are shouldering the burden of care work (Ysseldyk *et al.*, 2019; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Examining caregiving in academia further reveals that male academics are four times more likely than their female colleagues to have a partner engaged in caregiving at home, suggesting that the burden of caregiving in academic contexts disproportionately falls on our female colleagues (Schiebinger *et al.*, 2008).

Given that male academics are more likely to have partners who are engaged in caregiving in the home, *and* female academics disproportionately shoulder care responsibility, why then are male academics offered the same caregiving support as their female colleagues? Because the provision of gender-blind policies, such as parental leave and tenure extension, are implemented under the auspices of egalitarian caregiving when caregiving is anything but. Put more simply, parental leave and tenure extension policies do not take into account the gendered reality of care. Therefore, the notion that we, in academia, should continue to tout these gender-blind university

policies as beneficial to women caregivers is problematic. And to do so will only continue to make caregiving for women in the academy an untenable reality.

Gender-aware policy implementation/modification

Fortunately, feminist economics provides solutions to address support for women caregivers in the academy: the implementation and/or modification of university policy to support gender awareness. Gender-aware policies take into account the different social roles of men and women that lead to men and women having different needs (Kabeer & Subrahmanian, 1996) and therefore recognize gender as an essential determinant of differential outcomes for women and men (Kutzner, 2019; Verdonk et al., 2009). Note that the steps that follow are adapted from the literature to support the implementation and/or modification of university policies to enhance gender awareness (March et al., 1999; Morgan et al., 2016; Njuki & Miller, 2013).

Map your policy context

Mapping the policy context involves collecting information and creating an inventory to determine what policies exist; who influences the policies; whether there are programs which address the issue(s); summarizing existing research; and determining whether policies under scrutiny include a gender perspective. Another component to this step involves stakeholder mapping, which includes ensuring that those who can influence the policy issue(s) are taken into consideration. Knowing who the stakeholders are and ensuring there are champions at the decision-making level will better ensure policy implementation/change is supported at the necessary levels. Conducting a gender policy analysis is a vital component to this first step; gender analysis can help determine how the implementation/change of policy may affect men and women differently. Questions to ask in any gender policy analysis include: (1) whether the policy addresses the different needs of women and men, (2) whether the policy addresses the gender dimensions of the issue, and (3) whether the policy includes gender-neutral language that could lead to bias or exclusion of women (Morgan et al., 2016)?

Conduct research and collect data

In the context of academia, conducting research and collecting data may involve an analysis much like that of Antecol et al. (2018), where one is able to determine within their own university whether the implementation of gender-blind caregiving policies have seen men advance to tenured/promoted positions over women. For example, this could be accomplished through examining one's university comparators, the policies implemented at one's own university and comparative universities which are intended to support caregiving, accessing publicly available data to generate a dataset which contains links to policy information, types of caregiving policies in place, whether the university is unionized, and length of leave (in the case of parental leave) or extension (in the case of tenure extension). It is also important to assess the number of male and female faculty in tenure-track, tenured, and non-tenured positions, and whether onset of parental leave or extension have impacted these numbers over time through ones institutional research office.

Develop policy intervention(s)

Developing policy intervention(s) may involve drafting a new policy, amending an existing policy, or developing policy recommendations. Issues to keep in mind include efficiency (cost–benefit analysis), effectiveness (will the policy address the needed goals), and gender impact (will the policy contribute to greater gender equity).

Policy advocacy

Policy advocacy involves leaning on department chairs/heads and fellow faculty members as organizational allies in accomplishing gender-aware policy implementation and/or modification. Ensuring a diverse network of gender-aware policy advocates can help broaden the support base and add credibility to the initiative. It is especially important to engage male allies for support, as men are more likely in decision-making positions.

Policy evaluation and oversight

Upon the implementation/modification of policy for gender awareness, the use of the policy and its impacts on constituents must be tracked overtime to ensure the policy is effective and continues to be effective.

Whether designing a new policy, amending an existing policy, or making policy recommendations, a systematic approach grounded in quantitative and qualitative research and analysis is needed. Importantly, we'd like to point out that gender policy analysis is a tool to examine gendered realities beyond that of the binary women and men, and therefore can be used to understand LGBTQ+ policy issues and potential blindness and awareness, as well.

Practical gender-aware solutions to support existing caregiving policies

Among the 50 US-based research-intensive universities comprising Antecol *et al.*'s (2018) sample, all had gender-blind tenure extension policies. Of 88 universities comprising a comparator sample of primarily regional comprehensive universities, 79 have gender-neutral tenure extension policies, and many (59%) also include a paid leave component with an average 7 weeks of paid leave for caregivers (Burch, 2022). Furthermore, in an analysis of gendered effects of publication rates in academia, 42.9% of 450 Ph.D. granting institutions in the United States and Canada offered parental leave and/or tenure extension policies (approximately 193 universities; Morgan *et al.*, 2021). These studies indicate that parental leave and/or tenure extension policies to support caregiving are more normative than not in the academy, with the strong likelihood that these policies do not take into account the gendered reality of caregiving and therefore are supporting the advancement of men in the academy over their female counterparts.

What then can be done to enhance gender awareness in policies to better support women caregivers in the academy? First, universities should implement an addendum to existing policies that no research and productivity outputs started during any leave time (e.g., paid parental leave, unpaid parental leave, and tenure extension) will be counted toward one's tenure and/or promotion portfolio. Parental leave and tenure extension cannot continue to be used as a research and productivity golden ticket for male faculty. Reduction of teaching and service requirements while continuing to advance one's research portfolio already has a place in our academic institutions; it is called a sabbatical.

Second, along with the above addendum, parental leave, caregiving, and tenure extension policies need to be linked to actual care taking, as Gabriel *et al.* (2023) indicate. And while the language in caregiving policies must be sex-neutral to adhere to state and federal laws in the United States (Center for Work-Life Law, 2013), this does not mean that policies need to be offered equally to both men and women. Therefore, a practical solution may involve requiring those who partake in parental leave and tenure extension policies to sign a certification that use of said policies will be associated with at least 20 hours per week of actual caregiving.

Third, in an effort to reduce and/or stop the stigma associated with use of parental leave and tenure extension policies, these policies should be modified to be "opt-out" rather than "opt-in." Often, use of parental leave, caregiving, and tenure extension policies require the faculty member to formally request use of said policies, leaving faculty members to discuss with Department

Chairs and other university officials whether they will take leave. Importantly, redesigning policies to be “opt-out” rather than “opt-in” communicates to faculty that use of these policies that are available to them is expected, which may help to destigmatize the use of leave and tenure extension associated with caregiving.

Fourth, pregnancy leave should be treated the same as other types of disability leave. Gabriel et al. (2023) correctly note that men “do not shoulder the same physical toll of pregnancy.” And according to the Center for Work-Life Law (2013), many universities’ pregnancy disability leave policies are far less generous than other available medical leave policies.

Last, but not least, use of parental leave and other tenure extension policies must not count against faculty when they are being considered for tenure and/or promotion. Both external (when appropriate) and internal tenure and promotion committees need to evaluate candidates on their *countable* time toward tenure and/or promotion. Universities should adopt statements that explicitly state that no bias will be made against faculty who partake in leave and/or tenure extension when it comes to tenure and/or promotion, or other personnel decisions. Similarly, all faculty should be trained to recognize and prevent gender bias.

In conclusion, implementing and/or modifying existing policies to support gender awareness is necessary to level the playing field among women and men caregivers in the academy. Because without gender awareness in university caregiving policies, parental leave is just a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

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