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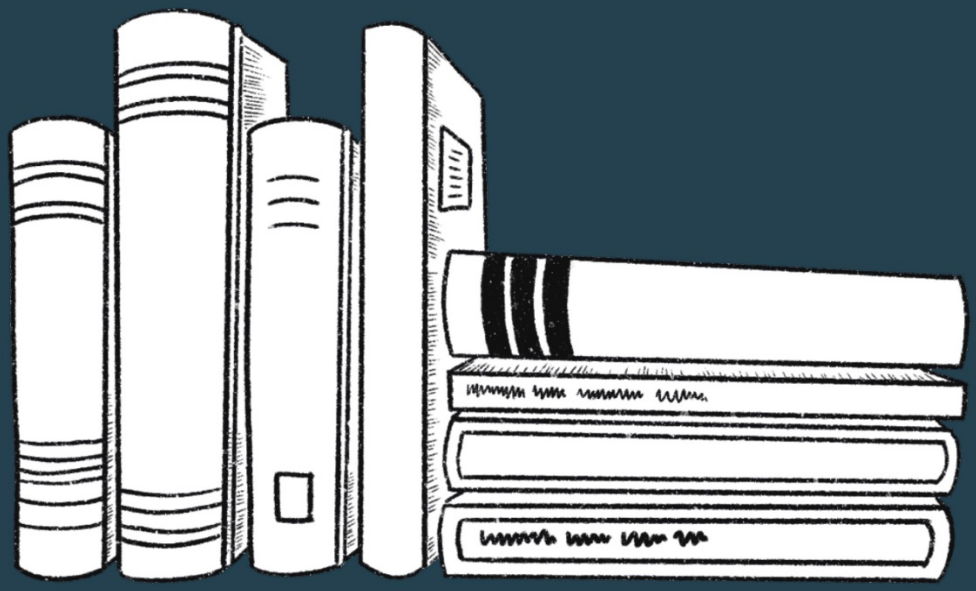

Canadian Academia and the Faculty Gender Gap

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Executive Summary

In recent decades, women have made substantial gains in nearly all realms of education. They are more likely than men to attend postsecondary, perform better academically during their studies and are often more engaged in extracurricular activities and campus life. However, although women make up over half of postsecondary graduates across Canada, they continue to be underrepresented in the senior ranks of university faculty. The number of women faculty in Canada has grown considerably over the last three decades, but progress toward equity in faculty appointments and earnings at universities is slow, and women continue to face cultural and structural barriers not encountered by their colleagues who are men. The situation is even more difficult for racialized woman faculty, who receive tenure and promotion at lower rates than non-racialized women faculty.

In this report, we contextualize the structural and cultural barriers women encounter as they navigate academic careers. We review the theoretical frameworks that help describe and explain how power and status inequities between men and women academics have been created and sustained. We detail how women academics, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, are penalized in workplaces where gender inequality is built into the fabric of the organization. Despite changing norms around parenting, family caregiving and equity in domestic partnerships, it is still the case that women carry more of the “second shift” than their partners.

Women academics are additionally burdened by identity and cultural “taxation” — the unique burdens placed on women and minority faculty to carry out service responsibilities in the university setting (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Research suggests that women academics do more than their fair share of service work at the cost of research productivity, which is more valued in the context of tenure and promotion. Women academics may also be perceived by hiring committees to be less capable, which can result in representation and wage differentials.

The glass ceiling is a pervasive phenomenon referring to the unstated norms and barriers that limit the career trajectories of women. These include having few women mentors in institutional leadership roles, sexism in the academic environment and structural assumptions that uphold traditional gender roles. Career trajectories are also influenced by the shrinking number of women scholars on the path to academic careers, known as the “leaky pipeline.” Women opt out or are pushed out of academia because of systemic barriers primarily related to caregiving and upward mobility.

This introductory report is the first of HEQCO’s Women in Academia project, the goal of which is to explore gender disparity among faculty at Ontario’s universities. Our focus is on representation across disciplines and faculty ranks, the earnings gap, the academic pipeline and the experiences of women academics in the disciplines of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Introduction

Women in Canada have made substantial gains in the labour market and in educational attainment over the last several decades. Women are more likely than men to pursue postsecondary studies, and they represent the majority of bachelor's degree, college certificate and diploma holders (Edge et al., 2018; Jehn et al., 2019). Despite these gains, women are still underrepresented in full-time faculty roles, and the gap widens as women move into academic leadership positions (Momani et al, 2019; Academic Women's Association, 2018).

The good news is that there appears to be growing societal awareness of gender inequality in faculty employment, as explored in a recent series by *The Globe and Mail* (Wang & Doolittle, 2021). Public sector salary disclosure legislation has made unequal compensation for women faculty difficult to ignore, while the global COVID-19 pandemic has shed more light on the additional challenges women face, such as increased family care demands and the disproportionate impact they have on women (Oleschuk, 2020).[1] Governments are taking note, as well: Ontario's Task Force on Women and the Economy was charged with studying inclusive economic growth and breaking down barriers for women in a post-COVID economy (Ontario Government, 2021). In this introductory report, we review the legislative context of gender discrimination in academic employment, describe current research on gender inequality among faculty at Ontario universities and explore some of the theoretical frameworks that help us understand gender disparity in academic employment.

Given the lack of longitudinal research examining the careers of Canadian academics, researchers have often used data, anecdotal evidence, case studies and cross-sectional analysis from the U.S. to discuss the promotion of women faculty in Canada (see Stewart et al., 2009; Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Although the U.S. context is important, it is insufficient to explain faculty hiring and promotion trends at Canadian universities. The Canadian university sector is shaped by higher rates of unionization, stability of tenure, lack of differentiation and few private institutions compared to the U.S. Most Canadian universities are publicly assisted, four-year undergraduate, research-intensive universities with unionized faculty. Faculty associations provide organizational support and structure to advocacy efforts on behalf of faculty; negotiated collective agreements include salary grids and clear procedures for tenure and promotion. Because of these differences, as well as the fact that it is important for Canada to confront its own data, our literature review focuses primarily on research carried out in the Canadian context.

Background: Literature Review on Women in Academia

Significant progress has been made toward gender equity in Canadian postsecondary education (PSE) through advocacy efforts, targeted funding and legislation. The 1967 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* and the 1984 *Report of the Commission on Equality in Employment* examined and made recommendations for the achievement of equality for women in the workplace (Silberman Abella, 1984). In 1986, the Canadian government established the Federal Contractors Program, which ensures that

[1] News outlets such as *The Conversation* and *University Affairs* have examined how this affects women faculty.

employers receiving federal funding seek to achieve a workplace that is inclusive of four designated groups: women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities. The 1995 *Employment Equity Act* required federal jurisdiction employers to engage in practices that would increase the representation of members of, among others, the same designated groups (Government of Canada, 1995). Canadian universities are participants in this program as recipients of federal research grants (Government of Canada, n.d.). In Ontario, the 2000 *Employment Standards Act* and the 1990 *Ontario Human Rights Code* legally protect workers from harassment or discrimination on the basis of sex or gender (Government of Ontario, 2000; Government of Ontario, 1990).

It is typical for postsecondary institutions to express a commitment to equity and diversity in their faculty hiring practices.[2] Many faculty collective agreements include clauses on salary anomalies that were drafted with equity principles at their core, and some Canadian universities have made serious efforts to address inequality in earnings through salary restructuring.[3] Despite these important initiatives and the development of federal pay equity regulations in 2020, the gaps in both representation and earnings for women academics continue to exist, revealing the need for regular review as well as further inquiry into the systemic biases which lead to inequity (Government of Canada, 2020).

Women have made substantial gains in nearly all realms of education in recent decades. Since the early 1990s, women have accounted for the majority of full-time university enrolments; they represent 56% of bachelor's degree holders in Canada and make up 58% of college, CEGEP and other non-university certificate and diploma holders (Edge et al., 2018). Women are more likely than men to attend postsecondary, perform better academically during their studies and are often more engaged in extracurricular activities and campus life (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Although the data shows that women make up over half of postsecondary graduates across Canada, they continue to be underrepresented in the senior ranks of faculty.

Women in the workforce continue to face cultural and structural barriers not encountered by their colleagues who are men. Despite a perception of meritocracy in academia, some research suggests that academia is among the worst offenders when it comes to gender disparity in appointments and earnings in the public sector (Momani et al., 2019). While the number of women faculty in Canada has grown considerably over the last few decades (Statistics Canada, 2019), progress towards equity in appointments and earnings at universities has been slow and there is still a "small but persistent" gap in salaries between comparable men and women academics (CAUT, 2011; Wiedman, 2020).

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) asserts that historically, women have been less likely to be appointed to tenure or tenure-track positions than men (CAUT, 2008b). A longitudinal analysis of tenure and promotion data from 1984 to 1999 revealed that women academics were granted tenure at essentially equal rates, but they were promoted more slowly than men from the rank of associate to full professor, even when allowing for differences in

[2] The Federal *Employment Equity Act* requires employers to identify and eliminate barriers against designated groups. Universities Canada has outlined equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives at Canadian universities.
[3] Some Canadian universities, such as Waterloo, McMaster and UBC, have attempted to address gender inequality in pay by giving tenure-stream women faculty a raise. See also OCUFA, 2016.

years of appointment, discipline and institution (Stewart et al., 2009). This is especially significant considering that most faculty at or below the rank of assistant professor were women (Statistics Canada, 2019). This problem has continued over time, and research suggests that gender bias across the academy persists both nationally and internationally (Bakker & Jacobs, 2016; CAUT, 2008b; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017; Ndandala, 2016).

The situation is even more difficult for racialized women faculty, who receive tenure and promotion at lower rates than non-racialized women faculty (CAUT, 2018; Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017; Henry et al., 2016; Oleschuk, 2020). Racialized faculty members face additional pressures to represent diversity within their departments and are often called to serve on committees and take on increased teaching or mentoring responsibilities. These activities take time away from research and are less valued in the tenure and promotion process (Padilla, 1994; Henry & Tator, 2012; Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). While we acknowledge that racialized faculty face additional and overlapping barriers, data on the representation of racialized faculty in Canada is limited and we are unable to explore intersectionality among university faculty with the data available (Henry et al., 2016).

Barriers Experienced by Women in Academia

There are many ways to think about gender inequality and its causes. Some scholars apply human capital theory to understand why there are fewer women in full professorships (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Women academics may be perceived by institutional leaders and hiring committees to have less human capital — individual skill sets, attributes and experience that are seen as essential for success in a particular field — which can result in representation and wage differentials (Park, 2011; Perna, 2001). Research productivity, in the form of publications and grants, is used as a marker for human capital in academia and is the primary method used to evaluate faculty for tenure and promotion decisions (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Using human capital theory, differences in tenure, promotion and wages are explained as a consequence of individual productivity.

Some scholars (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017; Perna, 2001) have argued that human capital theory cannot fully account for disparities in the academic reward structure. For example, a U.S. study found that while academic productivity “contributes significantly” to earnings for men in academia, it does not do the same for women (Carlin et al., 2007, p. 21). The researchers used data collected as part of a pay equity study to suggest that even if women are as productive as their men counterparts (through, for instance, publications, research grants, conferences and so forth), they continue to receive tenure at a lower rate (Carlin et al., 2007). CAUT has suggested that gender discrimination, as well as differences in level of education, professional experience, hours of work and age, could play a role in the gaps in pay and rank for faculty (CAUT, 2011).

Canadian workplaces are also impacted by the predominant cultural understanding and expectations of the “ideal worker,” a concept stemming from the gender norms of the mid-20th century. The prevailing workplace logic of the time favoured employees with few or no responsibilities outside the organization — most often, these workers were men (Sallee, 2012; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). Even though women made up approximately half of the Canadian labour force in 2019 (up from 22% in 1951), much of this “ideal worker” framing persists

(Connelly, 2015). Women continue to do the bulk of domestic work in households (Statistics Canada, 2020b) — even when employed full time — and may be perceived as less committed to their paid work and/or having less time and energy to devote to it. Despite changing norms around parenting, family caregiving and equity in domestic partnerships, women in heterosexual partnerships still carry more of the "second shift" than their partners (Carriero & Todesco, 2018; Horne et al., 2018; Lyonette & Crompton, 2015; Milkie et al., 2002).

Another lens through which to consider gender inequality are discourses, which provide ways of seeing and understanding the world, often with reference to power relationships (Sunderland, 2004). Gendered discourses — the ways in which we conceptualize the roles of men and women as they relate to work and family life — can be used to understand the differing expectations of women and men working together (Correll et al., 2014). For example, Griffith and Smith (2005) coined the term "mothering discourses" to capture the care, work and worries a culture expects of mothers (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 18). Mothers are expected to be the first responder to their children's needs but risk being harshly judged by their colleagues and peers when these obligations interfere with work. Women may keep their family responsibilities private and not pursue supports such as maternity leave out of fear that it will negatively influence others' perceptions of their productivity and work ethic (Finkel et al., 1994; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003). These decisions may ultimately impact women in layered ways: it delegitimizes the challenges a woman may experience in balancing work and family and may ultimately hinder her career progress and success.

Women academics are additionally burdened by identity and cultural "taxation," the unique burdens placed on underrepresented faculty to carry out service responsibilities in the university setting (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Padilla, 1994). This taxation is even more pronounced for racialized women. As part of a limited pool of people who represent diverse communities within the university, racialized women often feel obligated to serve as mentors and advisors for colleagues as well as students, at the expense of time spent doing research (Henry & Tator, 2012; Spafford et al., 2006; Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Service work can also include being a department head, arranging conferences, serving on committees, facilitating faculty meetings or organizing parties (Carlin et al., 2007). Time spent teaching, mentoring and undertaking other types of service work is time not spent on research; this can adversely affect tenure and promotion, where research is more highly valued than service (Bellas & Toutkoushian, 1999; Fairweather, 2002; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Johnson & Harvey, 2002).

The theoretical frameworks described above shed light on what Loden (2017) referred to in 1987 as the "glass ceiling." Women and other equity-seeking groups in many sectors of the labour market experience invisible barriers that keep them from rising beyond a certain level in an organization (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2008). These barriers are composed of a set of unstated norms and distorted expectations that obstruct women in their quest to reach full professorships, deanships, research chairs or university presidencies (Bain & Cummings, 2000; Williams, 2005; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2008; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). These theoretical frameworks are also useful for understanding how gender disparities in the academic environment perpetuate what is known as the "leaky pipeline." The pipeline refers to the "educational procession of undergraduate students through academia to tenured

professorships" (van Anders, 2004, p. 511). The "leaky pipeline" describes the shrinking number of women scholars on the path to academic careers (Valian, 2005, p. 207). Women opt out or are pushed out of academia because of systemic barriers primarily related to caregiving and upward mobility (van Anders, 2004; Mountz, 2016). Systemic and compounding challenges are amplified in certain disciplines.

Women's Underrepresentation by Discipline

Women have made significant gains in closing the gender gap in many fields but are still dramatically underrepresented in some disciplines, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).[4] There has been a lot of attention paid to plugging the leaky pipeline in STEM fields — from encouraging girls to join STEM clubs to mentoring for junior faculty — but in many disciplines, the gap persists. The shortage of women in STEM is widely recognized as detrimental to women. Science and technology occupations — particularly in engineering and computer science — are among the highest-paying and fastest-growing occupations, and greater diversity strengthens innovation and performance (Wall, 2019).

Women are underrepresented in full professorship positions across academia, but there are larger and more prominent gender differences by rank in the STEM disciplines (CAUT, 2018; Ginther, 2001). Although women now account for the majority of university graduates (Frank, 2019), they are still less likely than men to hold a degree in a STEM field. According to the 2016 Census, 37.5% of men with a bachelor's degree earned it in STEM, compared to 15.3% of women with a bachelor's degree (Statistics Canada, 2016). The proportion of women in STEM declines as they move through the leaky pipeline of graduate study, postdoctoral training and faculty positions. Some studies have found that women who choose to enter fields where they are underrepresented may be more resistant to subsequent obstacles (Cheryan et al., 2016), but the data indicates that the higher the faculty rank in STEM fields, the lower the number of women, suggesting there may be challenges to retention and promotion in these fields (Cheryan et al., 2016; Eisenkraft, 2013).

If we want to understand why there are so few women faculty in STEM, we must begin by considering the early socialization of boys and girls. We know that stereotype bias contributes to the educational and occupational aspirations of very young women (Seward et al., 2019). Children encounter stereotypes and perceptions about women's abilities in STEM fields as early as elementary school, where they are confronted with gendered images of professionals in literature, media and teaching tools. These stereotypes persist and shape young academics' perceptions of careers in STEM. Women are further discouraged from seeking STEM careers because they are deterred by STEM's masculine culture (Cheryan et al., 2016). As the Council of Canadian Academies (2012) suggests, stereotype-based expectations, a male-dominated environment and a narrow focus on the technical aspects of STEM can all contribute to the alienation of women in these fields.

[4] In this report we refer to STEM as a category but acknowledge that there is significant discrepancy in the representation of women faculty within STEM fields. Following reports in the Women in Academia project will illustrate this point.

Ironically, freedom of choice may give agency to the construction of stereotypically gendered "selves" (Charles, 2011). Freedom of choice can lead to the self-segregation of women away from STEM careers because some women may believe they're naturally good at gender-conforming activities, see certain fields as more appropriate for them or believe they will enjoy women-dominated fields more (Charles, 2011). Women's decisions may therefore be explained as a "choice" rather than as the result of stereotypes and socialization practices. If girls are not encouraged to enter STEM fields in the first place, a downstream impact on the number of women who pursue academia is inevitable and leads to a scarcity of women role models and leaders. Women faculty often serve as mentors who positively influence the professional development of women students (Dasgupta & Stout, 2014). The lack of supports and role models may fuel the "confidence gap" ; when a new graduate student looks around the lab and realizes she is the only woman, she may find it difficult to believe that she belongs there (Cheryan et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In this introductory paper, we describe the background and context within which future components of this project will examine the gender gap in appointments, promotion, earnings and experience of women faculty at Ontario universities using both quantitative and qualitative data. We have reviewed the legislative context of gender discrimination in academic employment, described the current context of research on gender disparity among faculty at Ontario universities and explored some of the theoretical frameworks that help us understand persistent gender disparity in academic employment.

Many of the obstacles faced by women faculty are structural and cultural and require sustained thought and action to fully address. Women faculty often face gendered expectations regarding their productivity, commitment, and expertise; they may also navigate professional pathways while also balancing caretaking responsibilities. For women in STEM disciplines, a lack of role models and mentors adds to these challenges. Navigating the path to tenure and promotion in this context may be daunting. For women faculty from equity-deserving groups, the challenge may be even more pronounced.

The postsecondary sector has a responsibility to think deeply about how to retain talented women scholars and confront obstacles that perpetuate gender inequity. Our interest in this topic stems, in part, from wanting to understand why — after decades of progress, increased awareness, and research and initiatives by government and universities — there is still a gender gap in Canadian academia.

The next report in this project, *Women in Academia: Gendered Trends in Ontario University Faculty Employment*, is a data-driven analysis of faculty appointments by discipline and rank using Statistics Canada's University and College Academic Staff Survey – Full Time Staff (FT-UCASS), which contains high-quality information dating back to 1970. The project will also include a detailed look at earnings by gender and discipline and a close review of the academic pipeline. In the final phase of the project, women academics will tell their own stories of progressing through the ranks in STEM fields at Ontario universities.

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