



The Workplace Challenges Encountered by Female Academics in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality in academia is a challenge endured globally with the under-representation of females in leadership and decision-making positions. Despite the numerous and diverse efforts taken by the universities to encourage gender equality, women in academia struggle to overcome the challenge of inequality. Around the world, the gendered academic organizational climate as well as the day-to-day interactions cause a major impact not only on female participation within academia but also on how they perceive their future in academic institutions. This research presents the results of a survey conducted with 48 female academics in Sri Lanka attempting to study female academics' experience with gendered challenges in academia. The research concluded that female academics are challenged in building networks and in reaching their desired career goals. It also revealed that there is a difference in the level of challenges faced by female academics in Sri Lanka depending on their marital status and childcare responsibilities. To prevent the withdrawal of female academics from the field and improve their satisfaction, it is crucial for academic institutions and the relevant authorities to understand the sources of these challenges in academia and implement effective solutions to create a better working environment for women academics in the country.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over decades, workplaces have served as battlegrounds for many social justice conflicts such as the gendered pay gap, racial discrimination, and discrimination based on sexual orientation. The situation still remains the same across the industries and it demands the attention of everyone to reach a fruitful solution.

The simplest form of equality in an organization is the absence of discrimination (International Labor Office, 2007). There cannot be equality in an organization when discrimination is allowed to coexist. Discrimination can take many forms, including, but never limited to, discrimination based on characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, race, age, physical and mental disabilities, pregnancy, and religious beliefs (International Labor Office, 2007). Nevertheless, equality in working organizations is now expected to be more than simply the lack of discrimination. Organizations must also provide equal opportunities to all employees hence everyone has the chance to learn and earn.

Even though most of the education systems in the world openly claim that they are built based on laws that are in favor of equality for all members and against all types of discrimination, gender inequality is widely evident in academic workplaces (Kibreet, 2023). Throughout history, there are records of numerous advances for women in various professional fields over the past few decades, it is apparent that women are still on their way to achieving the same progress in academia (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021). Notably, male academics outnumber female academics in academia in terms of research and publication. At a global level, female professors, deans, vice-chancellors, and presidents at universities are minorities compared to males in the same positions (Kibreet, 2023).

While the number of young females completing

bachelor's degrees and postgraduate degrees has increased in the past decade, the number of females in faculty positions, especially in STEM fields remains largely unchanged (Casad et al., 2020). One perspective to explain this situation is pessimistic and pervasive gender stereotypes, which may lead to hiring discrimination and reduced opportunities for women's career advancement.

In order to overcome the gender imbalance in academia, it is vital to understand the challenges faced by female academics and offer national and institutional-level solutions to them. Despite this importance, there was no local literature addressing the challenges faced by female academics in Sri Lanka. This research aims to address this identified research gap through this research. Therefore, the primary objective of this research will be to determine the challenges faced by female academics in Sri Lanka.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

An online survey was conducted using a questionnaire and 48 female respondents participated in the survey. 56 responses were required for the research population of 2529 (CEIC, 2018) (Ceylon Today, 2022) when calculated with a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 13. However, due to time and practical concerns of reaching out to the population for an unbiased response, the number of final responses was below the planned sample size. The respondents from around Sri Lanka from different levels of academia were reached through the social media channel LikendIn.

The questionnaire of the study consisted of questions focusing on demographic characteristics and the challenges faced by female academics in their workplace. The first section collected data on respondents' key demographics (age, marital status) and fields in academia and position. The next section targeted the potential gendered

challenges at work.

The study has identified perceived gendered challenges faced by academics in the work environment through the literature review. The respondents were asked if they have experienced receiving biased evaluations, injustice in getting the desired position, lower chance of promotion, and exclusion from formal and informal networks at work. The research further focused on major demographic characteristics of the female academics such as whether the respondent has children, marital status, holds a Ph.D., and is in a permanent position.

SPSS was used to analyze the collected data. The mean values and the independent sample t-test were utilized to achieve the objectives of the research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 48 responses were collected from female academics around Sri Lanka by sharing the online questionnaire on the social media platform LinkedIn. The number of responses was limited due to time constraints and low response rates. A majority of the respondents were from private higher educational institutes (n=25) and the rest were from governmental universities. Out of the 48 respondents, 18 respondents were specializing in the STEM field and the 30 respondents were specializing in the non-STEM fields. The demography of the sample can be further described as follows (Table 01).

Variable	Responses
With/Without Children	With Children -29
	Without children - 19
Marital status	Married -35
	Unmarried - 13
PhD completion	Holds a PhD - 6
	Do not hold a PhD - 42

Nature of the position	A permanent position -38
	A temporary position -10

Table 01

A scale of 1-5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree was used to measure the level of challenges faced by female academics in Sri Lanka. The mean values of each identified challenge as per the responses are as below.

Challenge	Mean
Biased Evaluations	2.8
Injustice in getting the desired position	3.8
Lower chance of promotion	3.5
Exclusion from formal network	4

Table 02

The respondents were in disagreement with the statement that they were receiving biased evaluations. This implies that there are fewer challenges faced by female academics in terms of performance evaluation. The respondents presented moderate opinions on the challenges of getting the desired position and receiving promotions. It clues the presence of additional obstacles that women in academia in Sri Lanka have to overcome when reaching their desired career goals. The highest mean value was related to the exclusion from the formal network which is an evidence of the severe challenges female academics of Sri Lanka face when networking among their colleagues for career advancement purposes.

An Independent sample t-test was conducted to explore if there is a difference in the challenges faced by female academics in Sri Lanka depending on their marital status, childbearing, Ph.D. completion, or the nature of the tenure. A p-value

that is lesser than 0.05 was reported related to marital status and child caring responsibilities. This implies that there is a significant difference in the challenges faced by female academics who are married and not married. There is also a significant difference between the challenges faced by females who have children and not.

4. CONCLUSION

The research concluded that female academics are challenged in building networks and reaching their desired goals. It also revealed that there is a difference in the level of challenges faced by female academics in Sri Lanka depending on their marital status and childcare responsibilities. It is the responsibility of academic institutions and society to initiate the change toward an equality-based workplace in academia. The first step should be to create a transparent and non-discriminatory culture that accepts everyone equally. Further, implementing gender-neutral recruitment processes, developing clear discrimination policies and equal reward policies can lead to equality in the academic workplaces.

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