



Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education and Research: A Contemporary Perspective

Adisha Manna¹

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Sairam College of Engineering, Anekal,
Bengaluru – 562106

E-mail: adishamanna.hs@sairamce.edu.in

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions, as key drivers of socio-economic transformation, are increasingly positioned as pivotal sites for advancing gender equity and diversity. However, despite these potentials, universities remain inherently "gendered" spaces, where entrenched patriarchal structures perpetuate systemic gender inequalities in representation, career trajectories, compensation, and scholarly practices. This Special Issue critically interrogates the persistent gender disparities within academia, highlighting how institutional and structural norms systematically disadvantage women and gender minorities, with implications that are compounded by neoliberal market logics, gender-based violence, and harassment. While Gender Equality Plans have demonstrated some institutional traction, their transformative potential is often constrained by resistance to cultural and structural change. A critical lens on intersectionality reveals the compounded disadvantages faced by marginalized groups, particularly in relation to caregiving responsibilities, racialized identities, and socio-economic status. Key themes include the marginalization of gender studies, the neoliberal commodification of academic labour, work-life balance, care work, and the impact of gendered labour divisions in academic hierarchies. The findings advocate for systemic reforms that move beyond tokenistic approaches, calling for a radical reimagining of academic culture and policy to address the deeply embedded gendered power structures.

Keywords: Gender inequality, higher education, gender equality plans, neoliberalism, academic labour, intersectionality, work-life balance, feminist institutionalism, gender-based violence

1 Introduction

Higher education and research serve as pivotal mechanisms for socio-economic empowerment and transformative change. As key institutions within society, universities possess the potential to be catalysts for advancing gender equity, fostering diversity, and embedding inclusivity not only within academia but across societal structures. Despite this, universities continue to operate as inherently "gendered" and "gendering" entities, perpetuating entrenched hierarchies and norms. Persistent gender inequities manifest in the form of skewed representation and pay disparities at both senior and entry-level academic positions, gendered segregation across disciplines and scholarly roles, and limited incorporation of gender lenses within curriculum



design and research paradigms. Furthermore, the prevalence of gender-based harassment and assault on campuses—issues long marginalized but amplified by the Me Too movement—exposes the pervasive influence of gender on the structuring of academic labour and capital. Between 2016 and 2019, incremental gains were observed, with female representation at the professorial level in the EU rising marginally from 24% to 26%, while the proportion of women heading higher education institutions reached 23.6% in 2019—a modest increase from 21.7% in 2017 (European Commission, 2019, 2021a). This data underscores the enduring need for structural reforms to dismantle gendered barriers within academia and promote genuine equality in intellectual and administrative realms.

The discourse on addressing gender inequality within higher education and research is crucial at this juncture for two significant reasons. Firstly, while men continue to occupy central positions of power within academia, traditional binary gender frameworks are facing unprecedented political resistance from gender minorities, thereby disrupting entrenched hegemonic gender structures. However, pervasive gender inequalities rooted in normative roles assigned to men and women remain deeply embedded and resilient. Despite the increasing interrogation of monolithic masculinity, both institutional and cultural mechanisms uphold a stratified social hierarchy where women and the feminine remain systematically subordinated. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures have intensified pre-existing gendered disparities, exacerbating the privilege-disadvantage divide across social domains, including the academic sector (Gewin, 2020). Within the competitive, market-driven framework of neoliberal universities, where purportedly "neutral" meritocratic standards often mask masculinist biases, lockdowns, social distancing, and the closure of educational and childcare facilities have reinforced structural obstacles to balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. Empirical evidence indicates that amid these pandemic-induced shifts in work dynamics, women in academia produced fewer first-author and corresponding-author publications compared to their male counterparts and faced diminished visibility in contributing to the scientific discourse around COVID-19 (Saglam, Drew, & Caglayan, 2021, p. 6). The articles curated in this Special Issue illuminate the myriad challenges to gender equity in contemporary academia, underscoring the urgent need for proactive interventions to prevent a regression of progress within higher education and research sectors.

In addressing entrenched gender inequalities within higher education, the strategic deployment of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) has gained momentum as an institutional mechanism for systemic transformation (European Commission, 2021b). GEPs encompass an array of targeted thematic areas shaped by contextual and institutional factors, including recruitment and career progression, work-life integration, leadership representation, organizational ethos, the integration of gender perspectives within research and pedagogy, and the prevention of gender-based harassment and violence. While various European universities report positive impacts from GEP implementation (Rosa et al., 2020), the effectiveness of GEPs in catalyzing sustainable institutional and cultural change remains subject to debate. Critics argue that GEPs are often overly instrumental, emphasizing efficiency metrics over substantive equity, and that



they frequently adopt conservative, limited frameworks on gender equality (Lätti, 2017). Moreover, GEPs must now operate within an evolving higher education landscape characterized by corporatization, marketization, and global competition, which present unique challenges.

The broader socio-political environment in which GEPs are developed and applied is increasingly complex, shaped by the dual rise of right-wing populism and contemporary feminist movements (Grosser & McCarthy, 2019), shifting masculinities and revived patriarchal narratives (Gilligan & Richards, 2018; Hearn, 2020), the entrenchment of intersectional perspectives on institutional gender discrimination (Woods, Benschop, & van Den Brink, 2021), and a notable uptick in male engagement in gender equity discourse (Subašić et al., 2018). This Special Issue assembles a spectrum of theoretical frameworks, drawing from feminist institutionalism, social constructivism, poststructuralism, matricentric feminism, feminist care ethics, interdisciplinary feminist epistemologies, transnationalism, and intersectionality, to interrogate the gender dynamics perpetuating inequality in academia. Through original research articles, this collection critically engages with current debates and policy mechanisms aimed at enhancing gender equality in higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in the post-pandemic context. Using diverse methodological approaches—including both quantitative and qualitative strategies—the studies featured explore university policies, transnational and multi-institutional communities, the complexities of care work and parenthood, and the interplay of identity dimensions within varied national settings. Contributions include case studies on innovative gender equality initiatives, as well as a comprehensive literature review on work-life balance challenges within academia.

In their article on "Sexual and Sexist Harassment in Spanish Universities," Lombardo and Bustelo apply a feminist institutionalist lens to analyze the institutional dynamics that facilitated and hindered the implementation of the "Protocol against Sexual and Sexist Harassment" at Madrid Complutense University. Through content analysis, interviews, and survey data from the university community, the authors reveal that successful policy execution relied on supportive governance, gender expertise within the university, feminist student organizations, and EU funding. Conversely, implementation was stymied by limited awareness of harassment prevalence and a cultural acceptance of such behaviors as "normalized" within the academic environment.

Drew underscores that while further integration of sex and gender analysis in research and education can enhance accreditation frameworks, the Athena SWAN (AS) initiative stands as Europe's most extensive and systemic accreditation scheme for advancing gender equity in academia, particularly critical in a post-COVID landscape. In their work on "Fostering Collaborative Approaches to Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and Initiatives in Higher Education and Research," Thomson, Palmén, Reidl, Barnard, Beranek, Dainty, and Hassan argue for the value of collaborative methodologies in institutional transformation. Due to the diverse levels of readiness and expertise across European institutions, collective frameworks are indispensable for facilitating comprehensive GEP implementation. They emphasize that



effective GEPs necessitate not only structured governance, legislation, resources, and incentives but also depend significantly on the commitment of individual advocates within institutions where collective advocacy may be limited.

Drawing insights from seven transnational, multi-institutional Communities of Practice (CoPs), the authors demonstrate how these networks empower agents of change, providing platforms for addressing institution-specific barriers to gender equality initiatives. Through collaborative CoPs designed for shared learning and strategic alignment, change agents gained external support, fostering their legitimacy in driving gender equality. CoPs enabled resource sharing, political solidarity, and knowledge transfer, though the transnational, interdisciplinary nature of these CoPs also introduced challenges due to contextual and geopolitical variances among members. The authors recommend addressing these divergences when developing cross-boundary CoPs to ensure cohesion.

In "The Trouble with Work-Life Balance in Neoliberal Academia," Rosa conducts a critical literature review that scrutinizes work-life conflict in the context of the neoliberalized university. Through a systematic analysis of 143 academic articles from the ISI Web of Knowledge, Rosa critiques mainstream work-life balance (WLB) frameworks embedded in GEPs, revealing their limitations in addressing gendered complexities. Although WLB is integral to cultural transformation within institutions (European Commission, 2021b, p. 32), Rosa finds that most research conflates "work-life" with "work-family" balance, marginalizing broader personal-life dimensions beyond familial obligations. This reductionist perspective, prevalent in literature, often overlooks intersectional factors and intra-gender diversity, failing to account for the gendered mechanisms shaping perceptions of WLB within academia's neoliberal context.

Rosa emphasizes the need for WLB research that critically engages with gendered structures, advocating for intersectional analyses that reveal how overlapping inequalities shape work-life experiences. The study proposes a multifaceted framework for future research that integrates gender, organizational culture, policy structures, and care services, examining their combined impact on individuals' perceived entitlements and options for achieving balance. The recommendations call for nuanced inquiry into how institutional and policy contexts define and constrain the work-life interface, encouraging a shift toward equitable and inclusive understandings of balance in academic environments.

In "Women and Care Practices in Canadian Universities," Gaudet, Marchand, Bujaki, and Bourgeault critically examine the often-overlooked domain of care practices within academia, offering a nuanced conceptualization of equity through the lens of caregiving. In a milieu dominated by performance-driven metrics, care work is frequently marginalized, despite its pervasive role in the academic labour of faculty members. Drawing from qualitative interviews with female professors, the study delves into the multifaceted nature of care work in higher education, uncovering how women engage in caregiving roles not only for students—undergraduate and graduate alike—but also for colleagues and the broader institutional ecosystem. These caregiving duties, central to their academic practice, remain invisible and



undervalued, reinforcing the performative culture of academia that silences vulnerability and impedes women's ability to advocate for their own health and well-being.

The findings suggest that this culture of invisibility around care tasks exacerbates gendered inequities, particularly in the way women's work is normalized as part of their academic identity, yet unrecognized as a legitimate form of labour. The study advocates for a paradigm shift that includes care as a recognized and valued practice within academic institutions. By reframing care work as essential to institutional functioning, universities could foster more inclusive and equitable environments. The authors also call for expanded research that employs an intersectional framework to capture the diverse dimensions of inequality that shape caregiving experiences, urging future studies to incorporate the experiences of academics from varied positions, including those in contingent or precarious employment. This intersectional lens would illuminate the differential impacts of caregiving across social and institutional strata, providing deeper insights into how systemic inequalities and gender intersect in the context of care. Ultimately, the authors propose that universities, as bureaucratic entities, must rethink their strategies for institutional responsiveness, ensuring that care practices are integrated into the organizational ethos to better address the vulnerabilities and needs of both faculty and students.

In "Gender Mainstreaming in Swedish Academia," Peterson and Jordansson critically engage with the 2016 Swedish government mandate, which instructed higher education institutions (HEIs) to integrate gender mainstreaming (GMA) into their organizational operations. The directive set a national framework for the GMA program, tasked with implementation across Swedish HEIs from 2017 to 2019. The study investigates how this macro political policy, designed as a broad gender equity strategy, was adapted and operationalized within the specific institutional contexts of 13 distinct Swedish HEIs. Using qualitative data derived from 72 key informants—university staff directly involved in the development of localized gender mainstreaming frameworks—the authors trace the intricate process by which gender mainstreaming was translated from a high-level policy mandate into concrete, context-specific actions.

The research centres on how local actors interpreted and adapted gender mainstreaming, identifying the organizational dynamics at play in these translation processes. Peterson and Jordansson reveal that, despite the policy's potential for transformation, the implementation often took an integrationist form, rather than a transformative one. The study highlights how gender mainstreaming was conflated with, and often subsumed under, related frameworks of diversity and equal opportunity. This amalgamation, while seemingly progressive, failed to adequately challenge the entrenched structural and cultural power dynamics within academic institutions. The authors argue that the translation of the GMA program was often shaped by pragmatic, neoliberal logics that prioritized institutional efficiency, thereby reducing its transformative potential.

Furthermore, the research underscores how the appointment of administrators with limited gender expertise to key translation roles further depoliticized the GMA agenda, reducing it to



a 'technocratic' tool. This procedural misalignment resulted in gender mainstreaming being absorbed into the existing organizational ethos, thus mitigating its potential to disrupt hegemonic gendered power structures. Peterson and Jordansson advocate for future research that adopts participatory methodologies, such as co-creation of knowledge and feminist participatory action research (FPAR), to empower those involved in the translation and implementation processes within HEIs. Such approaches would aim to reinvigorate the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming by directly involving practitioners in the reshaping of institutional norms and practices.

In "Gender Back on the Agenda in Higher Education," Morris, Hinton-Smith, Marvell, and Brayson critically engage with the dynamics of "gender work" within the contemporary UK higher education landscape, focusing on the challenges faced by those committed to integrating gender into the curriculum. Drawing upon a case study institution, the authors employ a combination of documentary analysis of course materials and semi-structured interviews with students and staff to illuminate the persistent marginalization of gender within the neoliberal framework of academia. Despite institutional rhetoric surrounding gender equity, the authors reveal that gender remains a peripheral, optional, and often undervalued component in higher education, largely overshadowed by the intensifying neoliberal managerial practices and deteriorating working conditions.

The study underscores the dissonance between institutional commitments to gender mainstreaming and the reality of gender work operating beneath the radar of mainstream academic practice. This disjunction reflects broader socio-political forces at play, wherein gender is relegated to the margins of institutional priorities. The authors align their findings with other scholarly work that critiques the tokenistic treatment of gender in academia, where institutionalized gender equity rhetoric often contradicts the lived realities of educators and students alike.

Despite these systemic barriers, the authors find hope and inspiration in the dedication of the practitioners they interviewed—individuals who bring creativity, passion, and a deep commitment to their students, even within a climate of institutional resistance. Drawing on these insights, they advocate for a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to gender equality in higher education, recommending that practitioners work in solidarity to share perspectives, advocate for institutional support, and mobilize resources to keep gender firmly on the academic agenda.

In *Sojourning as a Wife, a Mother, and a Daughter*, Phan utilizes a critical auto ethnographic approach to explore the transnational experiences of a Vietnamese doctoral student and mother navigating the intersection of her Vietnamese heritage and the demands of academia in New Zealand. Through theories of transnationalism, space, and place, Phan interrogates her own processes of spatial production and place-making, illustrating how she evolves into a "cultural translator" for her family members. This dynamic process transforms her home into a site of cross-cultural exchange and intergenerational legacy transmission, where the entanglement of



gendered family roles (motherhood and daughterhood) and academic identity unfolds within a complex interplay of disparate cultural, social, and institutional frameworks.

The paper foregrounds the significance of border-crossing as central to Phan's identity as both a mother and daughter, highlighting the reconfiguration of familial organization in the context of navigating multiple cultural, linguistic, and societal landscapes. By emphasizing the interplay between motherhood experiences and the divergent cultural practices in both home and host countries, Phan's work sheds light on the nuanced challenges faced by international doctoral students who are also mothers—particularly the pressures associated with childrearing, cross-cultural communication barriers, differing educational values and medical practices, and the fracturing and inheritance of cultural origins. This exploration gives voice to the often-overlooked issues international students face as they mediate between cultures, identities, and generations, thus highlighting the intersectional struggles that shape their academic and personal trajectories.

In *Go the Extra Mile*, Bonache, Carballo, Chas, and Delgado investigate the fears and barriers surrounding parenthood among Spanish early-career academics, where research excellence and parenthood are often seen as mutually exclusive. Drawing from an online survey, the study contributes to the growing literature on gender biases that reinforce traditional gender roles, complicating men's involvement in childcare and perpetuating the maternal wall faced by women in academia. The findings indicate that while financial stability and professional security are the most significant factors influencing the decision to have children, early-career women encounter more barriers to academic advancement post-childbirth. These women are also more likely to experience tension between professional development and parenthood than their male counterparts.

However, the research also reveals a shift in traditional gender dynamics, as men today are more likely to prioritize staying at home and raising children, signalling an evolving role of fatherhood in contrast to previous generations. The authors call for further research to explore the disparities in how men who wish to be actively involved in fatherhood perceive academic career barriers, distinguishing between those who embrace parental responsibilities and those who do not, in order to better understand the changing dynamics of gender, parenthood, and academic careers.

In *Never the Right Time*, Eren critically examines the intersection of pregnancy, maternity planning, and academic career trajectories within the context of tertiary education, specifically within the field of physics and the physical sciences. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women across four universities in Dublin, the study explores how maternity-related challenges impact women's career advancement from undergraduate through postdoctoral stages. The findings highlight a stark contrast between the experiences of women and their male counterparts, with female early-career scientists facing compounded disadvantages due to a confluence of institutional shortcomings.

Women in the study reported several systemic barriers including the lack of paid parental leave, short-term contracts, an absence of maternity-friendly work environments, and unclear



institutional policies surrounding maternity, which created a "leaky pipeline" effect, hindering their progression in academia. The precarious nature of employment contracts, coupled with the unavailability of maternity leave, exacerbates job insecurity, forcing many to reconsider their academic trajectories. Additionally, traditional gendered family roles, particularly maternal responsibilities, were found to be incompatible with the identity of women as scientists, further complicating their ability to maintain career momentum.

Eren's analysis underscores how the structural inequities embedded within academia—especially the gendered distribution of family and work responsibilities—serve as significant obstacles for women in the sciences, urging a revaluation of institutional policies. The study suggests that academic institutions must implement comprehensive, supportive policies for early-career researchers that allow for a sustainable balance between scientific achievement and family obligations. By doing so, institutions can prevent the marginalization of talented female scientists and foster long-term retention of the best researchers in academia, thereby addressing gender-based inequities within the scientific workforce.

References

1. European Commission, Year: 2019, SHE figures 2018. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
2. European Commission, Year: 2021, She Figures 2021: The path towards gender equality in research and innovation (R&I), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/61564e1f-d55e-11eb-895a-01aa75ed71a1>
3. European Commission, Year: 2021, Horizon Europe guidance on Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
4. V. Gewin, Year: 2020, "The career cost of COVID-19 to female researchers, and how science should respond," *Nature*, Year: 583, no: 7818, pp. 867–869, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-02224-3>.
5. C. Gilligan; D. A. J. Richards, Year: 2018, "Darkness now visible: Patriarchy's resurgence and feminist resistance," Cambridge University Press.
6. K. Grosser; L. McCarthy, Year: 2019, "Imagining new feminist futures: How feminist social movements contest the neoliberalization of feminism in an increasingly corporate-dominated world," *Gender, Work, and Organization*, Vol: 26, no: 8, pp. 1100–1116.
7. J. Hearn; S. Strid; A. Humbert; D. Balkmar, Year: 2020, "From gender regimes to violence regimes," *Social Politics*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa022>.
8. J. Hearn, Year: 2020, "Men and masculinities in academia, towards gender-sensitive perspectives, processes, policies, and practices. In D. Eileen & S. Canavan (Eds.)," *The gender-sensitive university, A contradiction in terms?* pp. 97–109, Routledge.



9. T. M. Heijstra; P. Einarsdóttir; G. M. Pétursdóttir; F. S. Steinþórsdóttir, Year: 2017, Testing the concept of academic housework in a European setting: Part of academic career-making or gendered barrier to the top? *European Educational Research Journal*, Vol: 16, no: 2–3, pp. 200–214.
10. L. Husu, Year: 2020, “What does not happen: Interrogating a tool for building a gender-sensitive university. In D. Eileen & S. Canavan (Eds.),” *The gender-sensitive university, A contradiction in terms?* pp. 52–66, Routledge.
11. M. Ivancheva; K. Lynch; K. Keating, Year: 2019, “Precarity, gender and care in the neoliberal academy,” *Gender, Work, and Organization*, Vol: 26, no: 4, pp. 448–462.
12. R. Kachchaf; L. Ko; A. Hodari; M. Ong, Year: 2015, “Career–life balance for women of color: Experiences in science and engineering academia,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, Vol: 8, no: 3, pp.175–191.
13. S. Kasymova; J. M. S. Place; D. L. Billings; J. D. Aldape, Year: 2021, “Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the productivity of academics who mother,” *Gender, Work, and Organization*, Vol: 28, no. S2, pp. 419–433.
15. M. M. King; M. E. Frederyckson, Year: 2021, “The pandemic penalty: The gendered effects of Covid-19 on scientific productivity,” *Socius*,” <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211006977>.
16. J. Lätti, Year: 2017, “Individualized sex equality in transforming Finnish academia,” *European Educational Research Journal*, Special Issue: Gender and Work/Life Interferences in Scientific Careers, Vol: 16, no: 2–3, pp. 258–276.
17. M. Paoletti; S. Quintin; J. Gray-Sadran; L. Squarcioni, Year: 2020, “Sexual violence on campus: Objectification, awareness-raising, and response,” In D. Eileen & S. Canavan (Eds.), *The gender-sensitive university. A contradiction in terms?* pp. 67–78, Routledge.
18. R. Rosa; S. Clavero, Year: 2020, “The challenge of neoliberalism and precarity for gender sensitivity in Academia,” In D. Eileen & S. Canavan (Eds.), *The gender-sensitive university, A contradiction in terms?* pp. 16–27, Routledge.
19. R. Rosa; E. Drew; S. Canavan, Year: 2020, “An overview of gender inequality in EU universities. In D. Eileen & S. Canavan (Eds.), *the gender-sensitive university,*” *A contradiction in terms?* pp. 1–15, Routledge.
20. G. Saglam; E. Drew; H. Caglayan, Year: 2021, “Putting a gender perspective to Covid-19 & higher education, EWORA webinar, 6 November 2020, summary report,” *European Women Rectors Association*.
21. L. Schiebinger, Year: 1999, *Has feminism changed science?* Harvard University Press.



22. E. Subašić; S. Hardacre; B. Elton; N. R. Branscombe; M. K. Ryan; K. J. Reynolds, Year: 2018, “We for She”: Mobilising men and women to act in solidarity for gender equality,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, Vol: 21, no: 5, pp. 707–724.
23. D. R. Woods; Y. Benschop; M. Van Den Brink, Year: 2021, What is intersectional equality? “A definition and goal of equality for organizations,” *Gender, Work, and Organization*, pp. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12760>.