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Reflections

Pouring from an Empty Cup: Women Faculty as Caregivers Amid COVID-19 and the Threat to Career Progression

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INTRODUCTION

When data from the Women in the Workplace 2020 (Thomas et al., 2020) survey were revealed recently, Sheryl Sandberg and Rachel Thomas, the co-founders of the nonprofit Lean In, which advocates for gender equality in the workplace, wrote, "If we had a panic button, we'd be hitting it" (Sandberg & Thomas, 2020). Survey results indicate that, amid the coronavirus pandemic and an economic recession in the United States, a quarter of working women with young children are considering leaving the corporate workforce (Coury et al., 2020). In September of 2020 alone, 865,000 women dropped out of the labor force, four times the number of exiting men (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). Coury et al. (2020) argue that the current exodus of women from the workforce threatens to derail hard-won, but still slow, gains towards gender parity in workplace representation and leadership.

Higher education is not immune to these disturbing trends. Although women now surpass men in earning doctoral degrees, women are less likely to earn tenure and promotion and earn less on average than their male counterparts (Perry, 2019; Rabovsky & Lee, 2018). The fact that women are overrepresented in part-time and adjunct positions and are sorely underrepresented at the highest levels of higher education leadership suggests that women in academia face significant barriers to career stability and advancement (Ballenger, 2010; Mason et al., 2013). While men and women alike are capable of entering tenure-track positions and earning tenure and promotion, the

legacy of traditional gender role beliefs (TGRB) often makes the process more challenging for women, particularly women of color (Harley, 2008). Although the workforce has changed since the 1950s, the conception of the "ideal worker"--traditionally manifested as a heterosexual, white male breadwinner with a white-collared job whose wife manages the household and cares for children, and therefore someone who prioritizes work above all else--persists in our modern, compartmentalized approach to our work and home lives (Davies & Frink, 2014).

In this essay, we explore how long-held TGRBs that define women as "expressive leaders" and caretakers (Bale & Parsons, 1956), and the institutional structures that support these norms, serve as barriers to women's career advancement in academia. From a social justice perspective, we consider the myriad cups faculty women fill as they assume the role of caregiver, how that role can threaten their career progression, and the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities in faculty expectations, evaluation and promotion, and career advancement. We present our argument from a binary view of gender, and thus use the terms women/men and female/male to refer to traditional gender identities and roles. We acknowledge that many academic men are also caregivers, both at home and at work, and that the issues we highlight here may not adequately capture the experiences of LGBTQ faculty who face additional barriers to career advancement (Garvey & Rankin, 2018; Patridge et al., 2014).

GENDER EQUITY, CAREER PROGRESSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Research shows that "attitudinal and organizational prejudices" (Ballenger, 2010, p. 3) contribute to barriers that many women in higher education leadership encounter. Women who work outside of the home have traditionally had to balance caring for family and work responsibilities. This unconscious bias that women are the de facto caregiver suggests that "unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is linked to discriminatory social institutions and stereotypes on gender roles" (Ferrant et al., 2014, p. 1). The stereotypical image of women as home-makers has led to the biased representations of women as the primary nurturers in the family and therefore responsible for managing children and domestic duties, regardless of the nature of outside employment. Thus, unconscious gender bias and gender schemas embedded in the cultural norms of many workplaces render unequal and inequitable policies, including the tenure system required for advancement in higher education (Easterly & Ricard, 2011; Magner, 1995).

The tenure system in higher education was originally designed in 1915 to protect "freedom and economic security" (American Association of University [AAUP], n.d.) for academics, following a probationary period of 4-6 years, during which junior professors demonstrate their capacity to research and publish while teaching entry-level courses and providing service to their college or university (AAUP, n.d.). Although this modern, and seemingly meritocratic, tenure system was designed more than 100 years ago to protect and retain professors, more recent studies reveal systemic bias in tenure and promotion processes against women and scholars of colors, including institutional gender schema biases in tenure evaluations, resulting in disparities in the advantages garnered by men over women in academia (Oleschuk, 2020; Valian, 2009). Further, the culture of academia neither recognizes, nor accommodates for, the multiple identities and responsibilities

diverse populations must juggle to achieve tenure, particularly women (Scheiber, 2020). Thus, a system designed to offer protection and equality is tainted by inequities.

The ABC Of Women Worker's Rights and Gender Equality (International Labor Organization, 2000) distinguishes gender equality from gender equity as a difference in opportunity to achieve equal status and standing without discrimination or "limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices" (p. 48). Aspirations, responsibilities, and opportunities should be valued equally and equitably, "according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities" (p. 48). From this perspective of equity that calls for "fair and equitable distribution of resources" (Bell, 2016, p. 3), we argue that the societal and institutional care work expected of faculty women requires them to distribute their time and energy resources differently than faculty men, often in ways that conflict with professional evaluation criteria and career progression.

THE CUPS ACADEMIC WOMEN FILL

The popular expression, "you can't pour from an empty cup," suggests that mental, emotional, and/or physical depletion impedes one's ability to serve oneself or others well and provides a useful metaphor to illustrate the social injustices female faculty experience as caregivers. To illustrate how one's time and energy are distributed, let us assume every person is allotted one cup. For faculty, this cup's contents symbolize the hours in a day and energy required to care for others directly (e.g., supervise, homeschool, bathe), to perform domestic duties involved in caregiving (e.g., chores, cooking, cleaning), and work duties (e.g., advising, grading, research). The contents of one's cup are finite; time and, for the most part, energy cannot be increased. Both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone was allocated one cup; yet, amid the global health crisis, the way many women distributed the contents of their cups shifted. During this time, women invested more time caring for family members (Power, 2020; United Nations, 2020); and faculty women spent increased time caring for their students (Alon et al., 2020). As faculty women diverted their time and energy to meet these increased needs for care, there was little left to be poured into other activities, such as research, that are necessary for career advancement and tenure (Scheiber, 2020).

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Historically, working women have taken on significantly greater caregiving responsibilities than working men (Germano, 2020). In fact, globally, women and girls are responsible for 75% of unpaid domestic work (Moreira da Silva, 2019). When comparing the duties of working mothers versus working fathers, women are ten times more likely to take temporary leave after giving birth, eight times more likely to look after a sick child, and more likely to take a flexible job which allows for increased caregiving time (Germano, 2020). Women stop working to take care of elderly parents and perform household activities more regularly than men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Germano, 2020). Female faculty also report shouldering a larger share of housekeeping duties (Wallace, 2008).

Women's domestic caregiving responsibilities increased when, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, government agencies mandated closing daycares and schools, which increased childcare responsibilities at home. Evidence suggests that many women were forced to shift their time and energy to meet an unanticipated and unprecedented demand for care at home (Coury, et al., 2020). With the expectation to continue to perform their professional duties, but without the support they had previously relied on for childcare, many women were placed in challenging situations. With few options, faculty women on social media regularly posted about how they wrestled with the decision of whether to work from home while caregiving, take FMLA leave (if available), quit their jobs, or try to find an alternative solution.

Yet, women's care work is not limited to the home. Compared to men, faculty women experience a disproportionate share of their department's care work, which generally consists of service responsibilities (Bird, 2011; Guarino & Borden, 2017) such as assisting students through advising and committee work. Additionally, students generally expect faculty women to have better interpersonal skills; to exhibit more warmth and care relative to their male colleagues. Evidence from teacher evaluations suggests that students reward male faculty for displaying a level of care that is simply assumed from female faculty (Boring et al., 2016; Macnell et al., 2015; Mitchell & Martin, 2018), and disproportionately penalize female faculty who they perceive as having deficient interpersonal skills (Basow et al., 2006). Given this gender bias, and the privileged position student evaluations have in determining teaching effectiveness, female faculty have to work harder to express care for students.

Amid COVID-19, professional caregiving demands increased beyond the norm as students shared their struggles to pay bills following a layoff, homeschool their children, and care for sick relatives. When the university closed, causing face-to-face classes to move online, students expressed how they struggled to find reliable internet and share devices with others in their household. As students faced these issues, faculty in one study reported modifying their course expectations to demonstrate increased care for students, such as eliminating unnecessary work or not counting assignments towards final grades (Johnson, et al., 2020). While this particular study did not collect demographic data on gender, presumably men and women faculty alike attempted to meet students' needs during the pandemic. However, our own experiences talking with colleagues during this time suggests that our female peers are more likely to describe demonstrating care for students in ways that go beyond course modifications. For instance, our female colleagues have shared how they regularly schedule meetings with students after-hours, thus sacrificing time with their own families, and frequently reach out to students to inquire about their well-being and offer encouragement and support, particularly to students struggling to complete their work. Our female colleagues have also been the ones to express a sense of guilt about feeling unable to adequately meet their students' (or own children's) social, emotional, and academic needs.

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EMPTY CUPS: THE THREAT TO CAREER STABILITY AND PROGRESSION

When faculty women's cups are emptied into those of their family members and students, they are left with reduced time and energy to invest in completing responsibilities that will earn them tenure and promotion, such as meeting research expectations, which disproportionately inform 'up or out' decisions (Acker, 2012; Santo et al., 2009). The pandemic accelerated the rate at which many women's cups were emptied. Faculty women's social media posts illuminated struggles to update courses to an online format and complete research and service obligations while performing extra caregiving duties at home and work. Women also noted how these responsibilities impeded their ability to fulfill implicit tenure requirements, those which demonstrate collegiality, dedication and reliability, such as attending synchronous meetings, quickly responding to colleagues' emails, or completing last-minute administrative tasks.

As a result, faculty women struggled to fill a never-ending line of cups, sometimes to their detriment. A decline in women's productivity could mean reduced scores on the next annual performance evaluation, missed merit raises, delays in career progression, or ultimately, rejected tenure and career advancement. In contrast, amid the pandemic, some faculty men were thriving. Early journal submission reporting indicated substantial decreases in articles submitted by women and increases in those submitted by men during this time, suggesting that men, particularly those not primarily caring for family members, were finding the time to be more productive (Flaherty, 2020).

More Time to Fill Cups or Changing How we Fill Cups?

University policies and statements have acknowledged challenges created by the pandemic and some have offered extra time toward achieving tenure; yet, flexibility does not promote equity for academic women. At this publishing, a spreadsheet shared in academic social media groups, detailed how 256 universities adapted tenure requirements. Nearly all universities included in the spreadsheet allowed tenure-track faculty the opportunity to opt-in or opt-out of a tenure clock extension, ranging from one semester to one year. Those who take the extension do not count the time elapsed during the pandemic toward their tenure clocks. As the global health crisis continues, the question of how long tenure will be delayed remains.

Still, past trends suggest that women are less likely to stop the tenure clock (Antecol et al., 2018). If more women choose to do so, it is probable that disproportionate delays in promotion and progression based on gender will ensue. Many leadership positions are open only to tenured faculty. Similarly, only tenured faculty may apply for selected larger research grants. Thus, women who have not earned tenure would be ineligible for these opportunities to advance their careers. Delaying tenure for family reasons also results in lower immediate earnings and lifetime salaries (Flaherty Manchester et al., 2013). Furthermore, stopping the tenure clock has been shown to substantially reduce the number of women who earn tenure, while increasing the number of men who earn tenure (Antecol et al, 2018). In the end, delaying tenure and promotion does not result in greater equity because women are still attempting to pour more from their cup, simply with more time to do so.

Another, less common option, is to adjust all expectations equally (e.g., requiring fewer publications, a lighter teaching load) regardless of gender and caregiver/non-caregiver status. Lowering expectations may be analogous to allowing everyone to fill fewer cups. While this

proposed solution would result in reduced expectations, and may make earning tenure more obtainable, it would not mitigate the systemic barriers experienced by women and caregivers.

Steps Toward a More Equitable Path to Career Advancement

To make the pathway to tenure and promotion more equitable, the focus should not be on helping faculty women fill more cups than men, but rather who is pouring from the cups, where and how the cups are being poured, and how universities can work toward a more equitable cup pouring system. Since caregiving responsibilities span both personal and professional domains, these issues are complex and multifaceted. While universities cannot mandate faculty's domestic caregiving duties, they should be aware of how these personal responsibilities affect one's professional work. To begin, universities can work to acknowledge and address the role of gender bias in career progression, rewarding care work within the academy, and distributing professional responsibilities more fairly.

Bird (2011) suggests that university leaders fail to recognize gender barriers and would benefit from learning about how systemic barricades operate and disproportionately affect women. Leaders throughout the university that are involved in promotion and tenure, from the department to the provost, should also become adept at understanding and monitoring each faculty member's service work, and be aware of the disparities which exist (Flaherty, 2017). By drawing attention to the time and effort invested in one's own care work and the care work of others, faculty may move toward a more equitable distribution of caregiving contributions.

Ultimately, changes need to be made. According to Adams et al. (1997), the goal of social justice is "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (p. 4). Without the equal representation of women at all stages of faculty and administrative hierarchies, institutions of higher education will continue to be places that undervalue the care work that faculty women perform in service to their institutions and society at large. Collectively, we can work together to reduce these gaps by paying closer attention to the cups faculty men and women are expected to fill, implicitly and explicitly, and adjust evaluation measures accordingly. For many academic women, the time to start is now.

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