COMMENTARY

When equal isn't equal: Contrasting equity and equality perspectives in supporting female professors

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"Equality is giving everyone a shoe, equity is giving everyone a shoe that fits" (Dosani, 2021).

In their focal article, Gabriel et al. (2022) presented realistic, moral, and financial cases to explain the need for department heads and faculty to support working women navigating pregnancy, motherhood, and child caregiving demands. Here, we extend the authors' arguments by contrasting equality and equity perspectives in addressing gender disparities in academia, suggesting that equality alone will not produce fair outcomes given inequality in baseline circumstances, concluding with equity-based recommendations aimed to advance women in faculty roles.

Gender disparities in work and academia

Despite the historical increased participation of women in workforce, the representation and experiences of women in the workplace still significantly differ from men (French, 2001). This circumstance holds true in academia, as underrepresentation among hierarchical academic ranks and institutional prestige persists (Gardner et al., 2018) given inherent organizational practices based on culturally embedded beliefs and assumptions about gender (Williams, 1995). These notions are evidenced by department heads' preference for faculty unburdened by family responsibilities, notably and disproportionally affecting women, whose tenure clock often overlaps with childbearing years (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). Women have further faced historical exclusion from PhD committees, group grants, and decision-making processes (Hopkins et al., 2002). Such examples are evidence of a system currently constructed toward perpetually penalizing women, at least partially explaining a lack of gender representation among faculty.

Indeed, in both academic and industry settings, evidence suggests that present efforts will not quickly or effectively combat issues of gender inequality without a change in approach. Thus, without swift action, systems will continue to fail women with regard to equitable benefits and rights for generations to come. As reported by the United Nations (2022), at the current rate of progress, it may take close to 300 years to achieve full societal gender equality, including 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and workplace leadership. The rationale showcases the unequal challenges and outcomes women face in contrast to men, underscoring the need for targeted, contextually informed, and equity-grounded efforts toward greater equality in benefits, services, and opportunities in the academic world.

Contrasting equality and equity perspectives

Though colloquially "equality" and "equity" are often used interchangeably, the constructs can be more precisely defined as the provision of equivalent outcomes or opportunities across all

individuals (i.e., equality), in contrast to the differentiated allotment of outcomes according to some standard, perhaps contribution or need (i.e., equity; Gilliland, 1993). Such concepts underly the policy of affirmative action, which attempts purposeful correction in opportunity affordance in response to past and current disadvantages experienced by historically and systematically marginalized groups (French, 2001). Moreover, as equity may involve treating people differently according to what they need or deserve, it is inherently more subjective than are approaches based in equality, which involve similarity in treatment irrespective of varying "starting points" in opportunity. Thus, equity-based approaches more precisely acknowledge the root cause of outcome disparities, promoting justice via greater individualization based in recognition of unique circumstances and barriers.

Indeed, uniform or identical treatment may lead to unequal consequences across groups facing differential burden and barriers. For instance, telework is often proposed to decrease work–family conflict for working parents (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Subsequently during COVID-19, teleworking fathers' time engaging in childcare responsibilities increased, accordingly reducing the gender gap related to caregiving (Carlson et al., 2022). However, despite this progress, women still maintained 60% or more of cognitive and physical household labor compared to men, regardless of work location (Pineault et al., 2022). Further, as evidence suggests women experience greater work–family conflict overall when teleworking than do men (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003), it appears "equal treatment" of certain job design accommodations (e.g., telework) may unequally impact workers according to their gender and caregiving status; in other words, equal treatment does not necessarily afford equal outcomes, depending on worker identity and circumstance.

In consideration of academia specifically, male professors are often considered the standard and point of reference upon which systematic decisions are designed, structuring privileges and ultimately perpetuating disadvantages faced by those less aligned to the "norm." In considering equal treatment within the context of women-dominated topics (e.g., caregiving), because systems were not inherently designed with women in mind, there exists a risk of equality-based approaches defaulting toward practices unsupportive of the unique challenges faced by women in caregiving roles, in favor of the standard that more often benefits men. Thus, it becomes critical to employ equity-based perspectives that consider the uniqueness of individuals when forming decisions or distributing resources, toward a more nuanced and appropriate conceptualization of fairness and justice. One such equity-based example relevant to academic settings is the implementation of individualized accommodations for both students and employees with disabilities, as such individuals are provided resources necessary to correct ableist systemic biases that may otherwise limit progress and performance. Accordingly, equity unlocks the possibility of digging deeper into ongoing issues unresolved by equality by calling for systematic changes in support of those not previously prioritized within the formalized structures, including women in faculty roles.

Equity-grounded recommendations for female faculty

Though we argue that policies currently implemented to alleviate strain and promote women in academia (e.g., parental leave, teleworking) have lessened the injustice experienced by female faculty to some extent, we suggest such approaches may be limited given their focus on equality instead of equity, consequently limiting their relative impact. To provide truly progressive support, we recommend equity-based policies and interventions directly targeting overarching gender disparity, including:

Identifying sources of inequity

A first step to any change is determining the root cause of the problem, and equity-based perspectives are uniquely appropriate toward understanding circumstantial differences leading to baseline inequality. Thus, it is imperative to collect data primarily from female faculty either through surveys, interviews, or focus groups to make informed, strategic decisions based in identifying and understanding the barriers faced by this particular group from their own perspective and in their own words. These assessments should avoid culturally laden assumptions and generic questions reinforcing the status quo, and move toward the creation of spaces safe for marginalized groups to voice their unique concerns and experiences. For instance, instead of asking "what are the current issues in the organization," asking questions allowing discussion about barriers experienced at all levels (e.g., individual, organizational, and societal) should lead to more nuanced and informed understanding of the circumstances leading to present gender disparities.

Developing equity-targeted interventions

Once sources of inequity are appropriately identified, interventions targeted directly toward correcting such circumstances must be developed and implemented. Gabriel and colleagues recommend interventions focused on caregiving; however, other sources of inequity impact women in faculty roles (e.g., exclusion from leadership positions, lack of demographically matched mentors, fewer opportunities for networking) and must be explicitly addressed toward achieving gender parity. Accordingly, developing targeted, specified, and data-grounded efforts to directly address inequity sources of all types is crucial, some of which may include women-oriented resource groups, mentorship programs, and greater opportunities for connectivity and social support among folks faced with similar barriers.

Foster organizational climate and culture around equity

Interventions aimed at correcting baseline inequalities penalizing women will only be impactful when paired with environments supportive of such efforts. Indeed, "chilly climate" has been defined as one characterized by exclusion, devaluation, and marginalization, and is considered a significant barrier to career advancement for women in academia (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). Accordingly, department heads and colleagues should focus on fostering an equity-based, inclusive climate where caregiving is recognized as universally valued (i.e., male professors are also encouraged to actively participate in caregiving responsibilities) and women experience sufficient tangible and psychosocial support (i.e., offer leadership training). Colleagues should be encouraged to create a more collaborative and empathetic climate and be more mindful about the language used (i.e., avoid the use of "burden" and "unprofessional") when addressing female faculty with family demands.

Conclusion

Current academic policies and procedures continue to fail women to the extent that caregiving responsibilities are not appropriately recognized and uniquely supported; though equality-based policies provide some remediation of the gender gap in caregiving, such efforts act only as a band-aid shielding the true sources of inequality lurking below. Accordingly, we recommend the more frequent application of equity-based perspectives in the identification and correction of barriers as more effective in supporting women faculty than will ignoring inherent differences in circumstances.

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