

## A Comparative Study of Female Academics in South African and Zimbabwean Universities on Their Career Mobility: Finding Equilibrium between Work and Family Roles

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**ABSTRACT** The paper reports findings on the perceptions of female academics on their career mobility and finding equilibrium between work and family in South Africa and Zimbabwean universities. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 senior female academics. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis techniques were used to analyse the data. The findings of the study reveal that not all female academics blamed lack of family and spousal support as the main variables why they had failed to realise their career mobility. Moreover, some female academics explained that contemporary gendered cultural and societal beliefs towards professional and working class females continued to affect them. The study recommends that males be sensitised on the importance of supporting females in and out of academia so that they can ease their career mobility.

### INTRODUCTION

There are several elements that impede on female academics as they strive to develop their careers in universities. As such, recent literature is indicative that academia is not a bed of roses when it comes to work and family unification (Sallee et al. 2016). Globally, it is anticipated that females, regardless of their education status, are expected to adhere to traditional customs and expectations so as to not lose “face value”. Unfortunately, this can limit their professional prospects all in the name of avoiding being characterised as indifferent (Dominico and Jones 2006). As a result, deleterious approaches towards female academics are due to the deeply-rooted obstacles with regards to their career mobility. Moreover, Domegan and Flemming (2003) in line with Nguyen’s (2012) thoughts, state that cultural backgrounds that females are expected to follow continue to position them in disadvantaged situations as they endeavour to advance their careers and at the same time finding balance between equally challenging roles at work and on the home front. Accordingly, Hardy et al. (2016) posit that the realities of the caregiving

role and the bearing this has on the regular work and career development of female academics continues to be multifarious because these differ with every family and workplace situation.

Nani (2011) also advances that the status quo remains the same on the challenges faced by females in their work environment. This scholar contends that females are often left to decide between work and family. This has resulted in some female academics’ career trajectory being negatively affected. Consequently, this may influence the management to view these intermissions as warning signs that females lack commitment. Understandably so, these notions in reality stem from the traditionally believed judgements in contrast to working females. Simply put, the structural inequities that are inherent within universities have had a profound impact upon retention (Hardy et al. 2016: 3).

Female academics have raised concerns that family duties are usually arduous and time consuming (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2004). Moreover, since the greater part of family responsibilities are directed to women, female academics are not immune to these assertions; as such, their career mobility continues to be slow paced. Moreover, literature also indicates that less job experience, part-time jobs, working less hours and taking time off is commensurate with the working life of female academics because they have to interrupt their career because of family responsibilities (Nguyen 2012; Sallee et al. 2016).

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On the other hand, Gaidzanwa (2005), is of the view that marital status, child birth and nurturing are the reasons why female academics are perceived as less mobile in their careers. Therefore, it is imperative to illuminate that the obstacles females encounter do not just crop up when female academics are employed, they are actually strengthened during their schooling, university and work, thus leading to a number of complexities over time.

In her study on female academics, Lam (2006) established that having a child in academia is an act of academic suicide, implying that achieving equilibrium between personal lives and a productive academic career continues to be pipeline dream for most female academics. Accordingly, Raburu (2015) advances that among other reasons, the career motivation of female academics is impeded by family conflicts. Sadly, the structure and policies within the universities are silent on female academics' needs, thus further reinforcing the status quo concerning female academic predicaments (Armenti 2004b; Forster 2001; Hardy et al. 2016) and career advancement. Moreover, it has been argued that ensuing inevitable conflicts and tensions to some female academics is a result of failing to balance the equation (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 2000). Furthermore, Acker and Armenti (2004) revealed in their study that younger female academics preferred to remain single and unattached so as to experience career growth. Acker and Armenti's results reinforce Ogbugo's (2009) claims that it is mostly those female academics in their fifties who experience career upsurge because their children are grown up; therefore, they have more time to network and make contacts that help positively in their careers.

Monroe (2008) also found that participants did not view balancing work and child as a measuring yard stick for their career development. In the same line of thought, Hakim (2006) advanced that the attitude of female academics in universities and not historical inequitableness was the reason why they continued to experience various shenanigans on their career trajectories. In addition, Hakim posits that academic profession is flexible, therefore no one should sympathise with those female academics who blame child bearing and rearing as the motive for failing to realise their career growth. However, studies conducted by Geber (2000) and Mwana (2010) refute the above assertions and add

that society (in South Africa and Zimbabwe) expects women to juggle between academic career and family life. Thus, the pressure of finding balance between work, family and outside commitment continues to intensify for female academics.

A study by Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2014) posits that university are also liable for the quandary of female academics because they have a bad reputé for disqualifying females who want a meaningful career and balancing family life as well. Linked to the above, Ogbugo (2009) and Raburu (2015) also state that the existing organisational culture in some universities restricts the realisation of career goals and aspirations of some female academics, thereby limiting their career mobility. Findings in a study by Santos (2016) in Portugal also advance the existing organisational philosophy in universities leads to pitiable workplace interactions, dearth of organisational support and employment instability, thus, negatively impacting on female academics' career progression. Therefore, literature highlights that universities need to be more compatible and do away with imbued patriarchal work and values so as to eradicate the hurdles that block female academics' smooth career advancement (Forster 2001; Hynes and Fearfull 2008).

Gudhlanga et al. (2012) within their writings on the trials and prospects encountered by females in the work place, stressed that low career performance of females is due to lack of adequate support in and outside of academia. The antidote is that universities should not interpret lack of career advancement of female academics as a separate entity or a personal predicament. In other words both internal and external factors must be taken into consideration because this ultimately has serious repercussions on the quality of universities and academics.

On the other hand, Cheng and Halpern (2010) and Verhofstadt et al. (2016) cite that family support is paramount for finding balancing between work and family and for the career development of female academics. Concomitantly, Erikson-Zetterquist and Styhrer (2008) assert that equilibrium between work and family is vital and at the same time possible, as long as role-related expectations that are meant to be shared and negotiated among work and family environment are made explicit. Accordingly, Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2014) state that universities should identify strategies that can be assimilated within the

university system to address issues concerning work and family and how positive results can be achieved.

Meanwhile, Beoku-Betts (2005) pronounced that globally, there is discernment that females are proficient in dealing with manifold responsibilities. However, observations have been made that this often generates snags for female academics and positions them in an unjustifiable situation as such, this entails a degree of control by the female academics to know at what time, where and how one should work so as to strike a balance (Shortland and Cummings 2007).

Concerns have also been raised through literature that an absence of equilibrium between work and family responsibilities usually leads to tension and remorse experienced by the female academics. This means that what is required is a constructive balance which necessitates a lot of effort and gratification through work and family roles. Consequently, this calls for well thought out allocation of time and level of commitment which should cut across all the affected domains (Jais et al. 2015). In other words, despite academic life being branded as intrinsically satisfying, it may also have negative effects both on a personal level and professional growth (Chitando and Mateveke 2012; Makura 2012) because both these aspects are time consuming.

The extant literature indicates that female academics continue to experience numerous obstacles as they endeavour to develop their career in universities due to failure to achieve an equilibrium between work and equally demanding roles at home (Gaidzanwa 2005; Mabokela 2002 2011; Raburu 2015; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to systematically investigate how lack of balance between work and family affects the career trajectories of female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities.

### Objectives

The objective of the study is to establish how female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities strive to achieve equilibrium between work and family to enhance their career development in universities

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised the qualitative approach because it allowed the researcher to capture the voices of the female academics within their nat-

ural setting so as to get rich and in-depth data (Creswell 2015). Moreover, this approach was adopted because it illuminated how female academics strive to achieve equilibrium between work and family to enhance their career development in universities. A case study design was utilised in this study for the reason that it would assist in highlighting the current status of the female academics in universities and also the imminent predictions of striking a balance between work and academia for female academics in universities (Corbin and Strauss 2014).

### Selection of Participants

Non-probability sampling techniques were adopted for this study. The sample size of 10 senior female academics was purposively nominated and this was grounded on the number of years of lecturing experience within the academia. Faculty deans and faculty administrators were used as gate keepers in helping to identify the most suitable participants who were in a position to expound how they have succeeded in remaining within the academic circles as well as negotiating equilibrium between work and academic productivity. Convenience sampling was used to identify the universities that would participate in the study (Kothari 2004).

### Data Collection Tools

The study used the semi structured interviews to solicit information from participants. The interviews were adopted because they are flexible, thus, allowing the researcher the opportunity to probe, clarify points made by participants leading to collecting of in-depth and expressive data from information rich participants on the phenomenon under study (Creswell 2015).

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative methods because it aligned with instrumentation adopted in the study. The data were transcribed verbatim (Patton 2015) in line with the researched questions posed to the participants. Data were analysed and interpreted through the collected data and thematic content analysis was utilised to identify emerging patterns through the female academics' responses in South African and Zimbabwean universities.

Below are the findings of the study and the participants and the universities were identified as follows: University X for South African university and University Y for Zimbabwean university. The female academics in university X were identified as P1-P5 and University Y P6-P10.

## FINDINGS

The researchers investigated how external aspects had affected the career development of female academics. The responses from both universities indicated similar patterns. Moreover they were a variety of factors that emerged as affecting the career trajectory of the female academics in universities. The major themes that emerged were as follows:

*The effects of socio-cultural role and career development for female academics*

*Female academics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and developing their careers*

*Achieving equilibrium between work family as a female academics*

The sub-themes from the outcomes were: *gender discrimination, cultural values and beliefs, marital status and family and spousal support, time management and work load*. The supporting quotes from the participants are outlined in the following sections.

The participants alluded that gender discrimination was still common and the upbringing of females also meant they have to adhere to the societal norms and beliefs that females are meant to be primary care givers. As such, this meant family matters took precedence over their career growth:

P2 articulated:

*I would say gender stereotyping within the society has affected us in one way or another, the way we are brought up and the expectations from the society leaves little room for us to see ourselves anyway else besides being home and taking care of the kids and not travelling to conferences and seminars.*

P4 opined:

*Culture is the main culprit here, the fact that there is still that belief that we have to look after the family will continue to affect us negatively in our career, we have internalised the cultural influence such that it is hard to let go.*

The female academics were of the view that a number of challenges that they experienced were equated with putting the family issues first before they could make whatever decision to enhance their career:

P3 articulated:

*Whenever we make decisions, the family come first in everything especially for those who are married. Sometimes you can get an offer that is very good in promoting your career but one would opt to stay because uprooting the family from A to B is not easy, so at times you would think this career is a bit flexible for single female academics that do not have family obligations.*

P10 said:

*It is the lack of family support and dual responsibilities, we always put our families first, and if you are not strong willed you can never progress. In our culture, visitors do not make an appointment to come and see you, they just come, my husband comes from a very large family such that it is very rare not to have one or two visitors every weekend and they is no way I can take my books and go and read in one of the bedrooms because they will go around other relatives houses saying she thinks working in a University is out of this world..... so and so's wife did not welcome us warmly when we visited.*

On a different note, P1 articulated that being a single parent and realising a productive career was a challenge:

*I am single, have no spouse but have kids and that alone plays a minus in some of my effort in developing my career.....I have to play mum, dad and at times nanny and that alone is a huge factor that eats away the already deplorable opportunities and time that are to there to develop my career.*

P5's feelings were that marital status or child bearing was not an excuse for failing to make headway in academia:

*First of all it is an individual matter and it depends on what arrangements you make, one really needs to know what their responsibilities are and how they will plan their cases, external factors just as male domination in Universities will take a long time to go..... these external factors are very common among female academics, we all have families, kids, spouses and partners and as long as you do not stand your ground then it will be hard.*

The annotations and propositions from senior female academics in universities under study propose that a common aspect that may be linked to failure of some females in achieving career enhancement is due to family commitments and demanding roles at home.

### **Female Academics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Developing Their Careers**

A majority of participants in University X and University Y underscored how lack of family and spousal support, marital status and motherhood were a major hindrance to their career mobility. The accounts of these female drew a sombre picture of the efforts to identify a balance between equally demanding roles at home and at work and these are epitomised below:

P1 bemoaned:

*Of course I think some very good opportunities have slipped past my fingers because of family responsibilities..... lack of family and spousal support hurts, I do not come from around here so my family is far away. I am a one man army. At one time I was set to go and my baby got sick and I had no one to help and so it was back to square one, I could not just leave the nanny with baby when he was not well". She continued: "you know we lack that one voice to fight for what is right for us, some Universities have made plans with day care centres to look after their personnel kids until the end of the day... family responsibilities also eats away a lot of time such that at times the issue of trying to develop my career ends up being the last on my to do list.*

P2 commented:

*Yes, on numerous occasions I have had to compromise my careers with family issues and it made me realise that what we need as female academics is to convince the management that in a sense our responsibilities with male academics are different. There are certain things that need to be considered in order for female academics to develop definitely as a women you negotiate there is no way out because at times you are needed in two or three places at once and you really have to let go one or two engagements and at times its work that you forgo and focus on family.*

Similarly P4 explained:

*Of course you negotiate, you see I got married and the next thing I said to myself is, I have*

*to conceive children for my husband, be there for my in-laws, be active in the family church.... I just had to start with my new family expectations as a newly married person before my career needs...but at some stage I realised how important it was to develop my career and I left my two year old to do another professional course, but really speaking I started having progression in my career after I had my last child.*

P6 said:

*Yes for my PhD I had by then, two kids and the girl was just a baby and my husband opted to give 6 months' notice at his workplace so I could continue with my studies, meanwhile I suffered with kids, I had to suspend my career and studies from those six months and this also delayed my graduation..... I was literally dying on the inside here I was with a blessing from God but my mind was just not there, I needed to get back to my studies and graduate.*

P7 expressed:

*I do not have children and I am not married, but I have had to step in and take care of my sister child and be a mother figure.... frankly speaking it is a problem as I have to deal with so many issues now that she is a teenager, I have to make plans every time and at times I end up forgoing some workshops so that I am not continuously absent.... which was different when I was alone.*

On a sad note P9 stated:

*Mine is a sad story I think, it has taken me 22 years to make progress at all with my PhD and these 22 years have been filled with putting everyone needs before mine..... There was a time I worked in Botswana and had to come back home because my sister was going away who had been looking after my kids, so I left Botswana and came back home to no job and I stayed for two years without a job that meant everything was on hold, I became a full time mother.*

Linked to the above, it appeared that the major challenge was that familial issues were the most controlling varied which acted as a barricade to the career development of females in academia. The concerns raise eyebrows because the participants' comments reveal that they are more concerned about what the society and families will say about them at the expense of developing their careers. Simply, these revelations are a cry for help for society to understand the fe-

male trajectories in the work place if at all they are to be at par with their counterparts.

Interestingly, P3 from University X also indicated that organisational culture and distribution of work load could also affect one adversely:

*In my case there was a time when I had to put my studies to a standstill, I am single and don't have children, so it was the working environment that was making me negotiate with my career development, I was so stressed and I nearly had a nervous breakdown, I just had too much workload, eventually I told the department in a meeting that I was not going to teach more than three course.....I was frustrated, nothing seemed to be moving..... I did not even ask to be relieved it was more of a command, I needed to take one step forward towards developing my career.*

Implications seem to point to child birth and familial issues as being the major culprits with regards to female academics achieve equitable and productive careers, it goes without saying that family support and organisational support are imperative for career mobility.

On the contrary, P10 from University Y was the only female academic from the study who was very adamant that under no circumstances should anything hinder an individual from their professional development.

*What!!!!, I wouldn't even want to negotiate that is why I admitted that most of the academics here think I am too competitive, and I know when it comes to my career I am very selfish, I have never negotiated with my career and I will never do that..... That is why I am even against these AA policies because they make female academics look as if we are being given amnesty and you negotiated your way to "progress".*

Conclusively, attaining a balance between academic and personal life requires collaboration at micro and macro levels in and outside academia so that female academics can gain visibility within the echelons of universities concerning their career trajectories.

### **Achieving Equilibrium Between Work Family as a Female Academic**

The participants were also questioned on the barriers that hinder their professional and personal development. Lack of time in and outside

academia was cited as the major problem. Below are extracts of their responses:

P1 whined:

*I am failing to manage time well .....and every time I have to rush home to see my small baby before he sleeps, I stay 30kms away from campus and normally when I get home he is sleeping and at times I leave the house before he wakes up I end up coming to the office over the weekend to try and do research on my PhD. Honestly socially I have suffered as compared to professionally, at times I wonder if I was married whether my husband would have tolerated my job. Putting a demarcation between my social life and my professional life is proving to be difficult..... What pains me most is that I have lost out on all the milestones that my baby has gone through because I am an absent mother.*

P2, also added:

*Wow!!! do I even balance, does the word balancing in academia exist? You know during the week it is very hard to meet deadlines because there is class, meetings, supervision, marking and administration to do and so the only free time is weekend, so I come to the office and I lock myself in and work, the time that I should be spending with my kids I am here, but then it's better for me because I am single, just think of a married female academic! She really is going to have a tough time if she has to come to the office Sunday to Sunday and at the same time trying to make her husband, in-laws and children happy, it's not easy at all!*

Likewise, P3 was of the view that:

*When you are an academic it's like there are no working hours or personal hours because even if you are driving you think work....., I cannot work in the office because of the number of students I have and you can imagine at the rate at which they come knocking on my door, so when I go home I work extra hours, I sleep late and I wake up very early....there is no time for resting, even during semester breaks or vacation, we use that time to cover a lot of ground with the postgraduate students, so even if you plan you can never balance.*

On the other hand, some of the participants felt that their shortcomings were more personal than professional, their comments were as follows:

P4 advanced:

*As a way of trying to find balance, I have neglected my family, I have put my family interests aside countless times and this has affected*

*my social life and that of other immediate relatives, though my partner is very supportive, I have a terrible guilty conscience hovering over me because I have to ask people to do simple things for my family that I should be doing myself, the problem is I focus too much on my career and there is no way I can neglect my work, so the other part which my family is paying the price.*

It is transparent that it is a mammoth task to have an equitable and productive academic career and while also endeavouring to fulfil all the responsibilities and roles at a personal level. Moreover, it may be implied that marital status of females also played a major role with regards to how an individual could realise their career growth. As a result, participants from both universities lamented that their career development continues to be marred by societal expectations.

## DISCUSSION

### **Negotiating a Balance Between Work, Family and Progressing as a Female Academic in the 21<sup>st</sup> University**

The career development of female academics continues to be fraught with numerous challenges one of them being striving to find a balance between work and family roles (Hardy et al. 2016; Trepal and Stinchfield 2012). The results of the study revealed lack of advancement of female academics was tied to the disproportionate burden of family responsibilities, lack of family support, deep entrenched cultural beliefs and work-life balance. Moreover, literature parallel with the emerging results points out that marital status, societal beliefs and culture also hinder progress of female academics (Bhana and Pillay 2012; Gaidzanwa 2005; Nguyen 2012; Sallee et al. 2016). Accordingly, this requires an identification of those salient aspects that impact on female academic careers.

The results of the study also indicated it was possible for female academics to realise their career advancement in universities as long as they were able to make arrangements on how to manage their work and family roles that suit and meet their needs. This stance could lead to positive result is the university could also assist their academics by coming up with flexible working arrangement as a solution for work-family

balance (Konig and Cesinger 2015; Warhurst et al. 2008).

The findings of the study also portrayed the cultural beliefs within the South African and Zimbabwean societies are deeply entrenched with regards to female roles. Consequently, this influences the decision that most female academics make by placing their career development as less important resulting in family roles taking primacy. The extant literature also indicates that universities are not capable of dealing with family issues (Nguyen 2015; Wolf-Wendel and Ward 2014). Therefore, it is paramount that family and spousal support for married female academics is solid (Verhofstadt et al. 2016). Additionally, April et al. (2007) point out that some female academics have been able to realise career mobility through unwavering family support, and domestic help. Research done by Thanacoody et al. (2006) also maintains that engaging domestic assistance can also be used in finding balance between work and family roles.

Ahmad's (2016) research on Family on Future in the academy illuminates that career trajectory of females can be enhanced by providing child care centres. This is in line with the outcomes of the study which indicated that there was a need for day care centres within the universities as this could reduce the time female academics have to spend in dropping and collecting their children at off-campus day care centres. The participants added that the introduction of day care would not only act as a motivation to female academics, but it would also show that the universities are concerned about helping female academics to find a balance between two contradictory discourses which are being productive as academics and on their personal lives as well.

This actually raises serious questions about the roles that universities should play in assisting female academics to achieve equilibrium between work and family roles. Moreover, other researchers including Blair et al. (2015) have taken this issue further by publicly indicating that a dearth of child care facilities for academics is indicative that despite being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and universities experiencing a number of reforms and transformations, a lack of sufficient flexibility to accommodate family and child care centres is still a fanciful dream.

According to Trepal and Stinchfield (2012), one of the most traditional gender roles for wom-

en is being a mother. However, from the results of the study, all the participants who are married alluded that their roles as mothers were compromised because they had to take extra hours including weekends and holidays, making it difficult for them to spend quality time with their families. As a result, literature points out that there a lot of sacrifices that female academics have to make in relation to environmental influences and their own experiences as they endeavour for career growth (April et al. 2007). An earlier study by van Anders (2000) shows that due to perceived institutional barriers to parenthood, some females may not take on academic jobs. Moreover, Baker (2008) and Bhalalusesa (2010) illuminate that some of the female academics choose to remain single, divorced or be single parents to avoid conflicts between work and family roles. However, Raburu (2015) in her recent study highlighted that in patriarchal societies like those in African states, show that failure by females to have children, being single or to be a single mother and not being married are choices that do not reflect true motherhood, hence, they are associated with cultural stigmatisation. Bhalalusesa (2010) confirms that family and children appear to place female academics in a situation where they end up being single, divorced or single parents.

Overall, it can be noted from the findings that balancing work and family is not a one-size-fits-all for female academics because some participants had made a choice to do more on the work and focus less on the family, whereas other participants put aside their career as academics and focused more on their personal lives. Simply, female academics continue being caught in between these two aspects; as a result, they may fail to give adequate attention to all areas.

### CONCLUSION

This paper sought to find out how female academics balance work and family roles in an endeavour to realise career mobility. Given the challenges that female academics encounter it was established from the findings of the study, lack of institutional and societal support where a major hindrance in achieving an equilibrium between academic and personal lives of these women. Conclusively, these results give more pressure to the universities and the society to establish meaningful ways that can be espoused

to salvage the female academics from this situation. Successively, it is also essential that female academics with the help of their universities identify strategies in which they can adopt and of course, with the help of society to find equal footing which will enhance their career mobility. The findings of the current article also cement the extant literature that female academics will continue to be placed in the peripherals in and outside of academic because of failing to challenge the status quo which places them as wives and mother meant to take care of the family only. Moreover, the culture of silence and failure to sensitise males on the importance of family and spousal and organisational support also contributes to slow chances with regard to career mobility of female academics in academia. This challenge to both universities under study has to be addressed if ever the universities are going to be able to retain female academics within the academic pipeline in the near future.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Female academics should be assisted and guided and appreciated so that they can be more assertive and progress in their career trajectories. Universities need to come up with strategies of promoting social support in universities. There is need for both universities to have gender sensitive leadership so that the voice of the females' academics can be heard. Moreover, the implementation of institutions gender policies that respond to the needs of female academics while promoting gender equality may assist to curb the percentage of females exiting the academia. There is need to create awareness of institutional policies that support the career mobility of female academics. Moreover, there should be training sessions and workshops for both male and female academics, including Professional Staff Development Programmes (PSDP) specifically earmarked for female academics to enhance their careers in universities. The universities must promote community engagement so as to create an awareness and address those societal problems that hinder female academics to rich the higher echelons in universities.

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