


COMMENTARY

## The dual role of faculty and motherhood: Enabling resources for successful coping

Edna Rabenu\*, Daphna Shwartz Asher, and Yahel Kurlander

Tel-Hai College, Upper Galilee, Israel

\*Corresponding author: Email: [edna.rabenu@gmail.com](mailto:edna.rabenu@gmail.com)

Gabriel et al. ([in press](#)) detail critical issues facing mothers in academia. We would like to strengthen that notion because mothers in academia face discrimination and confront unique barriers, unlike those challenging their male or female counterparts with no children.

Put succinctly, mothers have a specific vulnerability resulting from their intersectional status as women and parents. First, from the perspective of womanhood, women need to cope with gender discrimination in the workplace, manifested, for example, in a glass ceiling in promotion, low pay relative to men in equivalent positions, and sexual harassment (e.g., Karami et al., [2020](#)). In STEM professions – careers related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – severe underrepresentation of women is prevalent. Furthermore, the representation of women in academia declines as one goes up in faculty seniority level, which makes the promotion from junior to senior level faculty positions problematic (Corbett & Hill, [2015](#)).

Second, from the (academic) “parent perspective,” challenges include, for instance, coping with the occupational ticking clock for producing publications within a given tenure track period and dealing with pregnancy and raising a family during the same critical period. The attempt to deal with each category separately misses the mark of identifying the academic mother’s unique situation.

Consequent to this declaration, we respond to Gabriel et al.’s ([in press](#)) “call to action” and venture to suggest necessary changes in how scholarly women are supported in academia. Moreover, we preface our comments by stating that we share our perceptions from both our research interest in the subject (e.g., Greenberg & Kurlander, [2022](#)) and our stance as mothers in academia. Finally, before presenting our recommendations, we would like to emphasize three points:

- 1) Our proposal to support mothers in academia is not meant to replace actions taken for reducing discrimination against women in the labor market, in general, and in academic circles, in particular, under the umbrella of diversity and inclusivity in organizations.
- 2) Notably, Gabriel et al. ([in press](#)) focus narrowly on the challenges mothers face due to pregnancy and caring for young children. However, we stress that many mothers with young children are also the primary caregivers of aging parents. Indeed, Skinner et al. ([2012](#)) observed that while mothers have relatively worse work-life outcomes than fathers, women from the sandwich generation – middle-aged individuals pressured to support aging parents and growing children – have even worse work-life outcomes (p. 9). Therefore, the balance of work and family must incorporate the more general context of mothers who care not only for young children but for an entire family at many different stages of development.

---

The authors contributed equally to this work.



- 3) As Gabriel et al. ([in press](#)) also point out, parenting is not the exclusive domain of women; male parents also suffer from an unbalanced work-family environment. Notably, during the COVID-19 period, the difficulties of parents (compared to non-parents) in the labor market intensified in many ways (e.g., Tziner & Rabenu, 2021) though, markedly, during that period of remote work, mothers carried more family responsibilities than fathers (Sinclair et al., 2020). Therefore, our proposals (discussed below) might also benefit male parents, albeit with minor modifications.

The proposals fall into two categories:

- 1) The institution of an organizational women's community that offers personal mentoring to mothers in academia and
- 2) The institution of an administrative/advisory authority responsible for developing solutions tailored to the intersectional status of each mother as a faculty member.

### ***Mothers' community mentorship***

First and foremost, we believe that given their unique status, mothers in academia need emotional support and assistance in refining action strategies. Women of the same standing with the wisdom of experience can effectively deliver such support. Therefore, we propose developing a voluntary supportive network of faculty members who are mothers to serve as mentors according to their academic ranking position. Thus, undergraduate student mothers would be mentored by graduate student mothers and junior faculty mothers by senior faculty mothers, continuing up the ladder to senior management positions.

This structure would reflect a regulated systematic mentor-mentored chain based on intra-organizational knowledge. The system stems from the sponsorship model of the twelve-step self-help programs (Heyer et al., 2020). Initially designated for addicts, these programs are based on the assumption that those who experienced and overcame difficulties can help others in the same situation by creating trust and sharing their personal knowledge. In the academic organizational framework, mentors would be rewarded with incentives such as scholarships and reduced teaching hours according to the position of the mentor in the network hierarchy.

The mothers in academia who serve as mentors should be trained by their academic institution for their mentoring roles to perform effectively. As described by Bell & Rosowsky (2021):

“Mentors must resist the temptation to live vicariously through their mentees. They don't tell you what to do; they listen more than they talk. They offer perspectives you don't have and teach you how to make decisions yourself. . . Great mentors are self-aware, have reflected deeply on their own experiences, and can translate their experiences into lessons learned to be passed on to the mentee.” (Bell & Rosowsky, 2021, p.4).

For faculty members on staff (but not for female students), two additional types of activities are suggested:

### ***Quarterly forums***

The first activity is an intimate quarterly meeting with qualified outside parties invited to the academic institution's mothers' community. The purpose of the meetings is to enrich the resources of mothers in academia. For example, the parley might host leading researchers from other research institutions that will enhance international relations. Besides enriching professionally, hosting discussions with leading researchers – who are also mothers – will introduce practical tools to deal



with the stress arising from the multiple roles imposed on mothers in academia, such as effective time planning.

These activities will assist the mothers in balancing “demands vs. resources” such that the risk of burnout will be reduced. In other words, these activities might help mothers in academia to identify their strengths and boost the coping resources required for success in their roles with a more effective work-life balance. This supposition is based on studies demonstrating that coping *resources* are more critical than coping strategies in achieving high performance alongside well-being (e.g., Rabenu *et al.*, 2017).

The proposed forums will be associated with the specific organization; therefore, they are more intimate and allow sharing openly while cognizant of the individual participants’ strengths and weaknesses and exact needs. This model contrasts with current forum initiatives associated with a broader range of academic associations, such as AOM, SMS, and APA. Moreover, because the recommended forums are interdisciplinary, they accentuate that academic mothers’ issues reach beyond any specific field of research.

#### *Biannual writing retreat*

The second suggested activity is a biannual writing retreat. In our institution, such a research retreat, subsidized by the institution, is held for women only (primarily mothers). Notably, the faculty invited to the retreat are affiliated with all the disciplines and participate voluntarily. The gathering generally lasts three days, during which the participants are hosted at an isolated site surrounded by nature. The retreat’s goals are:

- To provide mothers with a quiet space that allows intensive thinking and an atmosphere conducive to writing away from the children, homely distractions, and related chores;
- To facilitate the creation of a supportive professional community. The retreat is mainly dedicated to participants’ research projects, yet a socially strong network is developed via shared meals and social activities. The retreat is very significant for the researchers, as recounted by Dr. Edna Rabenu (mother of four) after participating in a retreat that took place in September 2022:

“The magical atmosphere of the time and place, allowing calm work beyond the daily constraints, is priceless. However, the invaluable highlights for me included the opportunity to deepen my acquaintance with other faculty members, to receive small and big tips for effective research, and to enlarge my organizational awareness. The group at the retreat was a kind of professional support network promoting professional tasks and facilitating supportive relationships. The retreat was a very precious gift for me.”

It is important to note that in contrast to academic activities such as conferences, the retreat’s goals represent a different set of professional values; consequently, every woman should choose her priorities according to her academic needs.

#### **Inclusive authority personalized base**

Our second proposal calls for a formal administrative/advisory function within the organizational structure of the academic institution, whose role is to tailor solutions appropriate to specific “academic mothers.” The agency will be designated as an interdisciplinary supportive system that integrates organizational knowledge at administrative and academic levels with occupational and psychological counseling expertise and skills. As such, with the official authorization of the academic institution, the agency will be professionally competent to diagnose the academic mother’s acute and unique challenges and offer her tailor-made, comprehensive, and extensive solutions.



Instances of intervention might include, for example:

- Mediating with the administrator responsible for class schedules when the staff of this new authority recognizes that a given mother – especially a single parent with no spouse to assist – needs to adjust her teaching schedule due to motherhood needs.
- Acquiring funds for designated scholarships for the mothers' retreat (although subsidized).
- Matching mentors for candidates for senior administrative positions in the academic world as, for instance, an “academic mother” applying for a university presidential position who needs a mentor familiar with the job requirements (Reis & Grady, 2020).
- Attending to women who need to take maternity leave and care for their children. Such an interlude disrupts the women's career sequence, and consequently, requests for temporary teaching reduction that will facilitate progress with urgent research projects are needed.

The advantage of such an advisory body within the academic institution lies in its accumulated knowledge, experience, and professional acumen. Moreover, we expect such an agency to be creative and proactive, fruitfully providing management with practical steps to promote mothers struggling to achieve a successful academic career. For example, it has been established that women (more than their male counterparts) tend to perform citizenship behavior activities within the organization, often with little or no recognition or career advancement (Hager & Peyrefitte, 2021). In academic settings, such activities include participation in teaching committees or the organization of staff social events. Notably, these undertakings consume precious and limited time resources for mothers that compete with the time they could devote to research and publication, the primary means of promotion in one's academic field. Thus, to reduce the time mothers in academia spend on citizenship behavior activities, the established agency could recommend splitting those tasks equally among all faculty members. (To read more about the challenges of women in academia, see Young et al., 2017; Avargil et al., 2021).

In sum, in response to Gabriel et al. (in press), we reiterate the need to assist mothers in academia. Moreover, we suggest instituting (a) communities of mothers in academia providing personal mentoring and (b) an institutional authority responsible for developing personalized solutions tailored to their intersectional status. We hope and trust that policymakers will consider our suggestions within academic circles, thus benefiting mothers and the entire scholarly community.

## References

- Avargil, S., Shwartz-Asher, D., Reiss, S., & Dori, Y.J. (2021). Scientists' Perspectives: Choosing an Academic Career in Chemistry. Presented at *The 94<sup>th</sup> NARST international conference*. <https://narst.org/conferences/2021-annual-conference>
- Bell, G. R., & Rosowsky, D. V. (2021). On the importance of mentorship and great mentors. *Structural Safety*, **91**, 102076.
- Corbett, C. D., & Hill, C. (2015). Solving the equation – the variables of women's success in engineering and computing. AAUW. Retrieved from [www.aauw.org](http://www.aauw.org)
- Gabriel, A. S., Allen, T. D., Devers, C. E., Eby, L. T., Gilson, L. L., Hebl, M., Kehoe, R. R., . . . Rosen, C. C. (in press). A call to action: taking the untenable out of women professors' pregnancy, postpartum, and caregiving demands. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*.
- Greenberg, Z., & Kurlander, Y. (2022). “A Strong Feeling of Togetherness”: A group of low-income single mothers bargain for their place in academia. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2022.2056774>
- Hager, T., & Peyrefitte, M. (2021). Resisting the managed and fragmented selves in academia: Collaborative autoethnographies about modulations of control and surveillance in the neoliberal classroom. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **88**, 102502. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102502>
- Heyer, J., Schmitt, Z., Dombrowski, L., & Yarosh, S. (2020). Opportunities for enhancing access and efficacy of peer sponsorship in substance use disorder recovery. In *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1–14).



- Karami, A., White, C. N., Ford, K., Swan, S., & Spinel, M. Y.** (2020). Unwanted advances in higher education: Uncovering sexual harassment experiences in academia with text mining. *Information Processing & Management*, *57*(2), 102167.
- Sinclair, R. R., Allen, T., Barber, L., Bergman, M., Britt, T., Butler, A., Ford, M., . . . Yuan, Z.** (2020). Occupational health science in the time of COVID-19: Now more than ever. *Occupational Health Science*, *4*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs41542-020-00064-3>
- Skinner, N., Hutchinson, C., & Pocock, B.** (2012). The big squeeze: Work, life and care in 2012-The Australian Work and Life Index. *NSW*, *27*(28.1), 27–27.
- Rabenu, E., Yaniv, E., & Elizur, D.** (2017). The relationship between psychological capital, coping with stress, well-being and performance. *Current Psychology*, *36*(4), 875–887. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-016-9477-4>
- Reis, T. C., & Grady, M.** (2020). Moving mentorship to opportunity for women university presidents. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *18*(1), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.24384/3txj-jw75>
- Tziner, A., & Rabenu, E.** (2021). The corona pandemic: A challenge to performance appraisal. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *14*(1–2), 173–177. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.24>
- Young, G., Kilborn, M., Arnold, C., Azam, S., Badenhorst, C., Godfrey, J. R., . . . Pickett, S.** (2017). Women reflect on being well in academia: Challenges and supports. *Learning Landscapes*, *10*(2), 335–351.