

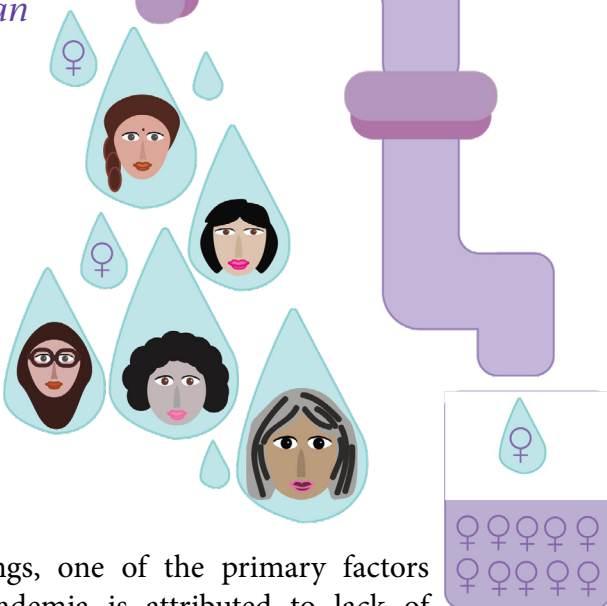
PLUGGING THE 'LEAKY PIPELINE'

Need for women-friendly workplaces in academia and how we can create them in the future

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The 'leaky pipeline', a metaphor that is commonly used to allude to women dropping out of the academic ladder, starts at the level of doctoral positions and only exacerbates with each increasing rung. The result is that even with women making up 30-40% of the enrollments in science programs across the country, only about than one-fifth of the faculty positions in science at leading institutes are held

by women. Amongst other things, one of the primary factors for this gender disparity in academia is attributed to lack of familial or institutional support during the initial years of career building. The commencement of postdoctoral stints or faculty positions typically coincides with other life activities, such as marriage and child rearing. As a result, several bright and talented women are forced to drop out of academia due to inadequate 'safety nets', especially with regards to the latter.



While this phenomenon (and the related 'glass ceiling') has been investigated in great depth for decades, and several remedies proposed to counter the problem, one could argue that the only true fix to this issue is a societal change in mindset regarding the gender roles attributed to women. This would take care of the issue of insufficient family support that was alluded to earlier. The second solution, that of institutional support, is perhaps more easily implementable. By making the measures proposed have little to do with changes in attitude and all more to do with policy and infrastructural changes, perhaps

we can expect quicker turnarounds from ideas to execution. One or more of the measures enumerated below have already been undertaken by research institutes across the country, but making these solutions a part of research policy will help integrate more women in academia in the long run.

Conducting gender sensitization workshops on a regular basis

Every individual has an outlook on gender and gender roles that is molded by their upbringing and environment. However, as the proportion of women in academia increases, it is imperative that both men and women are educated on aspects related to gender equality and prevention of sexual harassment. Several institutes across the country have gender sensitization and sexual harassment awareness workshops that are conducted regularly and are required to be attended by all faculty members, students and staff. Such workshops go a long way in making sure that women feel welcome in academia.

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Easy access to day-care facilities

A key feature of empowering women researchers is establishing a day-care centre on campus. The presence of a reliable day-care centre in close proximity to the workplace ensures that new mothers can return to work as soon as possible, without having to rely on a support system at home to take care of the new family member. So too, having a centre on campus where regular check-ins on her child are possible affords her some much-needed peace of mind. Again, several research institutes in the country have realized the importance of a day-care centre in retaining women in academia and have partnered with local day care centres to set up shop within campuses.

Tenure-track assessments that take maternity leave into account

Typical tenure-track academic positions in India require tenure applications to be submitted within 5 years from the commencement of the position. Several institutes and universities do not take maternity leave periods into consideration when assessing applications for tenure, thereby unwittingly penalizing women for a natural phenomenon. By recognizing and acknowledging that women need

time out during pregnancy and after childbirth to get back to science will ensure that women are not unfairly put at a disadvantage. In a very welcome move, the Indian Institute of Science has formally amended the tenure policy to extend the duration before tenure assessment for women faculty members by 1 year per child (to be availed twice at most). Other research establishments in the country should follow suit, if they haven't already, in making their tenure process equitable.

Accommodating the schedules of women in academia

Several young women have the inevitable duty of juggling work obligations alongside family responsibilities. Institutions and universities would be doing a great service by being cognizant of the limitations on daily schedules of women (and men) imposed by such responsibilities. For example, scheduling important meetings after regular working hours and on weekends alienates parents who are unable to find a babysitter for their child for the duration of the meeting. While 'skyping in' might be a viable solution in this instance, this author feels that having only a telepresence dilutes opinions on key issues that may be discussed during meetings. Therefore, restricting all meetings to regular working hours will increase participation of women in academic policy.

Access to formal or informal mentoring and support groups

Finally, young women will benefit immensely by identifying mentors who will help them navigate the complex academic landscape – everything from advice on student hiring and grant applications to assuaging fears and keeping themselves grounded. Institutes/universities can aid in this process by formalizing the mentor-mentee relationship and facilitating regular meetings. Online and offline career support groups for women, consisting mostly of peers from various backgrounds, also serves to assist women in academia find a platform to seek help and advice. Institutes and universities can foster such local support groups for women by allocating resources and infrastructure for meet-ups, and by promoting conversations between institute administration and group members when recommendations for policy changes arise from such meetings.

Coupled with increasing conversations around the world regarding gender equality, these measures ensure that equal representation of women in academia is only a matter of time.