



Between Career and Motherhood: Understanding Female Academics' Pursuit of Success with Hofstede's "Masculinity/Femininity" Dimension

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Abstract. According to Hofstede's (1984, 2001) work-related cultural dimensions, a masculine workplace encourages success, ambition, and competition, often at the expense of its employees' pursuit of well-being and meaning in life. In this paper, a small-scale ethnographic study has been conducted to shed light on how female academics in Hong Kong struggle to pursue their meaning of life by striking a balance between career advancement and motherhood. Based on Hofstede's framework, the first part of the paper examines the demographic differences in recruitment and promotion of male and female professors in a university of Hong Kong. The second part of the paper discusses the findings collected from the semi-structured interviews with three female academics working for the university. The local study is in line with recent research overseas, which reveals how female academics, in the hope of pursuing their meaning in life, strive hard to juggle their career, marriage and motherhood.

Keywords: Academia · Geert Hofstede · gender roles · motherhood wage penalty · professorship

1 The Stress for Success and Stress of Success in Academia

To many, career and work give meaning to life. Being able to strike a balance between career and family is key to a meaningful life. This applies to most people, and academics are no exceptions. However, competence, success and excellence in research and teaching have long been considered as academic hallmarks. The work stress, well-being, and mental health issues in academia are on the rise. It was reported that in Europe, 37% of the university staff have shown signs of a mental health disorder (Guthrie et al., 2017). Likewise, in another 2017 British research study on academic stressors and strains, it was found that 43% of the academics experienced depression, anxiety and burnout at some point of their career (Gorczyński et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, compared to the hardship experienced by their female counterparts, male academics are already advantaged. The path of success for female academics is surprisingly narrow. According to Bothwell (2016), at The University of Hong Kong,

less than 20% of the tenured professors are women, and only about 14% of the senior leaders are female. Even in higher institutions in developed countries such as the U. K. and the U. S., gender equity is obvious. At The University of Lancaster in England, for example, only 22% of the tenured professors are female. Males take up 66% of the senior leadership positions. On the other hand, at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., 36% of the tenure professors are female, but less than 26% of the females made it to the senior management positions. This shows that in terms of gender equality, universities in the U.K. and the U.S. are only doing slightly better than universities in Asia. Choi and Cheung (2012) stated in their study that female academics have been under-represented. The limited chance for success and the unconscious gender bias that female academics are facing are worrying:

Among the eight government-funded tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, only about 35% of professorial staff are women. Women's representation drops still further as you look up the ladder to leadership: only 13% of provosts are women and Hong Kong has yet to have its first female vice-chancellor or president in a government-funded tertiary institution...over the past 16 years, for most of the higher education institutions in Hong Kong, the proportion of junior female academics has increased between 2 per cent and 10 per cent, but the increase in senior female academics is negligible (*Lack of female university leaders*, 2015).

It is inevitable that in academia, female academics are disadvantaged in both recruitment and promotion. Female academics face maternity penalty and suffer from the gendered effect of childbearing (Lutter & Schröder, 2020; Troeger et al., 2020). Keeping a balance between career and family is almost unachievable. While one's pursuit of life meaning can be separated from one's career development, the obstacles and glass ceiling at work can be detrimental to the well-being of the individuals. The questions at issue are: what makes it so hard for female academics with children? Why do so many female academics drop out of academia? To begin with, Geer Hofstede's "Masculine/Feminine" dimension (2001) can be used to explain the gender norms at work. In a high masculinity work environment, staff members are expected to gear towards speed, money, and performance. There is no sympathy for the slow, small, and weak. On the contrary, in an organization with a feminine work culture, quality of life and people are considered to be of utmost importance. Staff members are expected to take care of both performance and relationships. Considering the stress for success and stress of success experienced by the faculty, the academia in Hong Kong is classified as highly masculine. In fact, it would be healthier to introduce a feminine work culture into the existing male-dominated structure.

2 Purpose of the Study

Javidan and House (2001) claim that Hong Kong is not listed as one of the high-scoring cities that maximize gender role differences. In 2020, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) in Hong Kong also proudly announced that the labour force participation rate of Hong Kong women was 49.6% compared to 66.2% among men (Zhu, 2022). The figures seem to indicate that Hong Kong, unlike countries such as South Korea and Egypt, allow

a relatively high degree of gender equality. Nonetheless, when it comes to the academia, a working environment that is forever driven by the university ranking and the outstanding results of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the situation can be very different from that in other professions. There is a need to inspect closely the work culture, the appraisal measurement system, and the proportion of female academic staff working at university, in particular the percentage of women in management positions (Hofstede, 2001). The pursue of happiness and meaning in life should be incorporated in the work culture, and gender politics should not be overlooked. With a view to investigating the work culture and the well-being of female academics at university in Hong Kong, this paper presents the gender segregation of academics across different ranks in various Schools in one university in Hong Kong. Alongside the statistics, the first-hand sharing of three Hong Kong mothers working as assistant/associate professors shall offer a fuller picture of what the work culture is like at the university in the case study.

3 Research Method

The work culture of a large-scale organization with more than 500 staff members is complex, particularly when the organization is a university that consists of “many micro-organisations, including disciplines, schools, and departments” (Miedtank et al., 2020, p. 13). To investigate whether a university addresses gender equality at work effectively, the research study cannot rely merely on the overall female to male employee ratio, which can be misleading. Two dimensions of segregation, namely horizontal segregation and vertical segregation, should be used to measure the gender distribution instead. In academia, horizontal segregation refers to the gender ratio of academics in different schools or faculties, such as the School of Arts, the School of Business, the School of Law, the School of Medicine, and the School of Science. On the other hand, vertical segregation indicates the “hierarchical divide” (Hustad et al., 2020, p. 1) of male and female academics across different schools. In this small-scale study, both horizontal segregation and vertical segregation were used to investigate the gender diversity and work culture at a university in Hong Kong. The following statistical figures were collected from the university website in April 2022:

- (1) the gender ratio of academics with professorial rank across different schools;
- (2) the percentage of junior and senior female academics across different schools;
- (3) the percentage of women in university senior management.

In addition to the quantitative data mentioned above, this study also looks into qualitative data. The female academics' views on their own workplace, career and motherhood were collected through three 40-min individual interviews with three female academics in December 2021. All three interviewees are Chinese mothers in their mid 30s, and they are currently working in different fields of studies at the same university. Adapted from McGrath's (2014, p. 43) semi-structured interview with working mother, the following questions were set in the interviews with the female academics:

General:

- (i) How many children do you have?
- (ii) What is your current job like? Are you happy with your workplace (e.g. maternity benefits, work culture, colleagues, etc.)?
- (iii) How do you take care of your child/children after work?

Work and Aspirations:

- (iv) What does professional success mean to you? Do you feel that you have achieved it?
- (v) How does being a mother impact your career and promotion opportunity?
- (vi) Do you think your gender has influenced your career choice?
- (vii) Did age or fertility concerns affect your choices to have children? If so, how?

Gender Roles:

- (viii) Do you feel torn between your career and motherhood?
- (ix) How do you manage to balance your role as a mother and an academic?
- (x) Is there anything you would like to add?

Through the mixed methods research design, the study reveals whether the university in the case study shows a masculine work culture driven by keen competition, outstanding performance, and academic stamina, or a feminine culture with a preference for nurturance, work-life balance, as well as loyalty and belonging.

4 Research Findings and Discussion

Both the qualitative figures and quantitative data collected from this small-scale study reveal that there is obvious imbalance in the gender ratio of male to female academics. Not only are there fewer female academics recruited, there are also much fewer female senior academics and management leaders at the university. This suggests that the work culture probably favours male academics in terms of recruitment and promotion. Unconscious gender biases in the workplace may be the reason for the gender imbalance.

4.1 Gender Segregation of Academics at a University in Hong Kong

The statistics in Fig. 1, generated from one university in Hong Kong, shows that overall, the ratio of male to female academics holding a professorial rank is 68:53. In other words, about 56.2% of all the professors, associate professors and assistant professors at the university are males, 43.8% are females. The horizontal gender segregation is also revealing. Across the four major Schools, namely Business, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education and Science, male academics took the lead in most of the Schools,

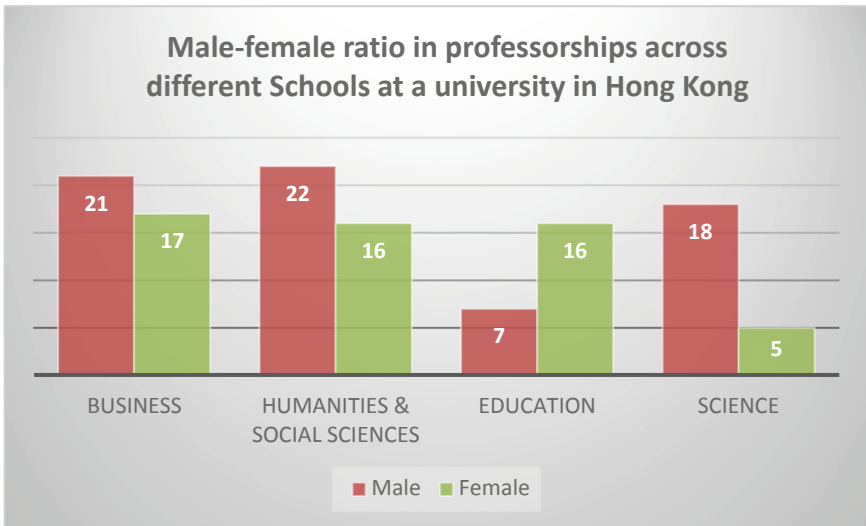


Fig. 1. Gender ratio of academics across all major Schools at the university

with the exception of the School of Education, where female academics dominate the School.

Among the four major Schools in the university chosen for the study, the School of Science has the highest population of male academics, where over 78% are male. Likewise, close to 58% of the academics in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and about 55% of the academics in the School of Business are male academics. Only the School of Education has a high percentage of female academics, which is about 70%.

In alignment with the horizontal gender segregation, the vertical gender segregation reflects that there has been a significant imbalance in the gender ratio. Among the four Schools, three Deans out of four are male. Also, across the ranks of professor, associate professor and assistant professors, there are consistent more males than females (Fig. 2).

To be more specific, all Deans are male except for the Dean of the School of Education. In the School of Science, male academics dominate in all professorial ranks, where 75% ($n = 3$) of the professors, 100% of the associate professors ($n = 5$), and over 71% of the assistant professors ($n = 10$) are male. Compared to the School of Science, the School of Business has a better gender ratio. The male-to-female ratio of the professor rank and that of the assistant professor rank are both 1:1. However, a high percentage of the associate professors are male. Only about 35.7% of the associate professors are female. As for the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, the percentages of male academics in the professor rank, associate professor rank, and assistant professor rank are 100% ($n = 1$), 28.6% ($n = 2$), and 63% ($n = 19$) respectively. Among the five female associate professors of this School, only one of them are from the Social Sciences division, the rest are all from the Humanities division. The only School dominated by female academics is the School of Education. The one and only one professor, who is also the School Dean, is female. The gender ratio of associate professors is 1:1. Almost 78% of the assistant professors are female ($n = 14$). However, few of these junior female

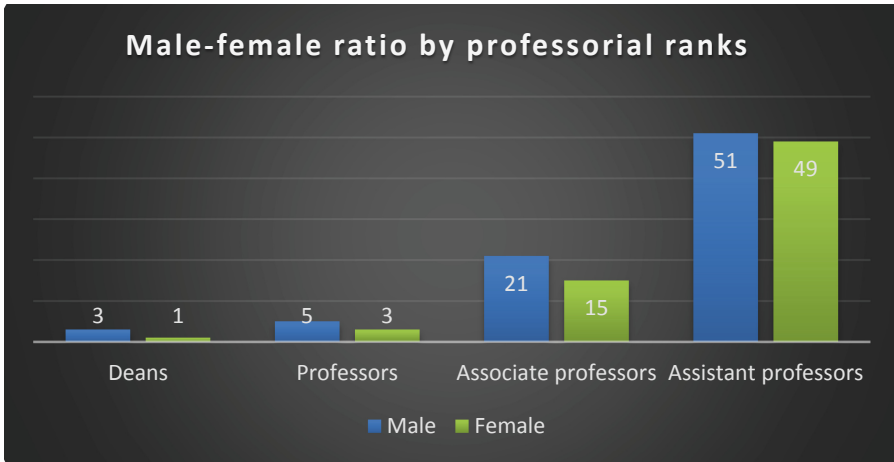


Fig. 2. Gender ratio by professorial ranks at the university

academics would be promoted, even after 10 years of service. Currently, three out of four associate professors in the Education School are male.

Considering the horizontal and vertical gender segregation, it is fair to say that in terms of recruitment and promotion, the work environment in the university chosen for this study is beneficial to males. Not only have male academics outnumber female academics, the population of senior academics is also male-dominated. The male-to-female ratio of academics holding a rank of associate professor or above is 9:13. This means that fewer female academics are recruited as assistant professors, and only about 40% of the senior academic staff members are female. In addition, the university president, provost, and vice-presidents are 100% male. Females are not given much room for management leadership. While the figures are not particularly encouraging, the university chosen for the study is already more ‘women friendly’ than most universities in the city. As revealed by the University Grants Committee in 2018, of all the eight government funded universities in Hong Kong, only 18.8% of the senior academic staff members were female (Lam, 2018). By and large, academia in Hong Kong favours male academics. It is not at all easy for female academics to develop their career.

4.2 Interviews with Three Female Academics

The gender segregation statistics in the previous section have reflected the gender imbalance in hiring, promotion, and leadership in the higher education sector in Hong Kong. Yet, to understand the difficult situation that female academics are encountering, the study collected qualitative data from three in-depth individual interviews conducted with three female academics who teach Chinese, Tourism, and Psychology respectively at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Case Study 1: Dr. Y. The first interviewee, Dr. Y, is an associate professor of Chinese with a 4-year-old daughter. Just like many other male academics, she completed her PhD,

got married, and started her academic career as an assistant professor at a university. Being a proliferate scholar, she actively takes part in conferences and other academic activities. Having published a good number of journal articles and secured major government grants in the past few years, she has been promoted as an associate professor lately. She is both a top professional and a mother. To Dr. Y, the meaning of life and the path to fulfillment is not through one thing, but many core components, including education, career, marriage, motherhood, home, family, accomplishment, and enlightenment. In the interview, Dr. Y revealed the tension between motherhood and career development, which she considered as a threat to her pursue of meaning in life:

How can one be a good mother and a keen academic at the same time? I always have this guilty feeling of not having enough quality time with my child. The housemaid is playing the nurturer's role for me now. How I wish I were the one who prepares meals for my family. Yet, I don't want to give up my career. I hope that I can be a role model for my daughter. I want her to see how important it is for a woman to enjoy her career, gaining satisfaction and a sense of achievement from her work.

In the eyes of her colleagues and students, she is a successful superwoman who well-deserves her achievement today because she is hard-working, intelligent and efficient. However, Dr. Y believed that both hard work and luck are needed if a woman wants to have it all. She noticed that not all female academics can strike a balance between work and motherhood, "It is unfortunate that my keenest academic female friends are mostly single and childless." As can be seen in the performance measurement system (PMS) in the university for which Dr. Y is working, academics have to compete with one another in the same School to obtain a good grade for their annual appraisal. Each year, only 10% and 20% of the academics can get an A and B+ for their appraisal. The majority (50%) will get a B, and the lowest 20% will be given the unsatisfactory grade of C to E. In other words, the PMS shapes academics to fight one another as rivals until the last man wins. Assertiveness is rewarded, and fierce competition among colleagues are encouraged. Barely any room is allowed for nurturance, friendship, well-being, and work-life balance (Eunson, 2016).

What makes the PMS even more rigidly masculine is that the evaluation scale of the PMS reflects extreme meritocracy. In all three areas to be assessed, namely research, teaching, and services, success and accomplishment are always determined by quantity and numbers - the academic who has the highest number of publications in the best journals wins; the lecturer who earns the highest score from the end-of-course student feedback gets the Best Teacher Award; the academic who joins conferences and other scholarly activities most frequently scores the highest. Now that meritocracy dictates the PMS, the value of an academic is reduced to a set of numbers. Only work that can be materialized into PMS points and scores is considered 'meaningful'. The institution is so greedy and masculine that even a female academic as keen as Dr. Y finds it hard to maintain the balance between her career, motherhood and family:

My family is thinking of having a second child. I am now in my mid-30s, and I do have age and fertility concerns. I feel pressured to decide between my career progress and the ticking female fertility clock, too.

Dr. Y expressed that she has been struggling between her roles as a mother, a wife, and an academic. According to Chang (2010):

Women experience a motherhood wage penalty that cannot be explained by work experience, education, and other factors that are typically associated with one's earnings. When researchers take into account differences related to earnings such as job experience, educational attainment, and previous part-time employment, they find that mothers receive a 4% wage penalty for the first child and a 12% penalty for each additional child (p. 65).

While women with non-work responsibilities such as child care and housework are penalized, male academics with children do not suffer from any fatherhood wage penalty (Wharton, 2005). The work culture is not only masculine, but also sexist. This may explain why in Hong Kong, four out of five senior academics are male, and since “[w]omen who have no children advance faster into higher-paying positions than mothers do” (Newman, 2011, p. 71), senior female academics who have two or more children are the minority of a minority. This is not a good sign, because junior female academics do need female mentors whom they can look up to. If a university wants to establish a healthy, gender-neutral, and mother-friendly work culture, it needs to start by recruiting more female leaders and providing more promotion opportunities for female academics.

Case Study 2: Dr. L. The second interviewee was Dr. L, an assistant professor of Tourism. Both Dr. L and her husband graduated from their PhD studies from The University of Hong Kong. Shortly before she joined the university, she gave birth to her first child. At the time when she had the interview, her baby was only 8 months old. She felt that she has lost 12 weeks of maternity leave because in most countries, including Australia, the U. K. and Mainland China, full-time working mothers are given 26 weeks of maternity leave, whereas in Hong Kong, mothers only have 14 weeks in total. To save more time for bringing up babies, many pregnant academics in Hong Kong would go to work until 7 days before the expected delivery date, leaving 13 weeks for post-partum rest and baby care.

Also, since Dr. L has had experiences working in Mainland China, she could not help but compare the fringe benefits offered to full-time working mothers in Hong Kong and in the Mainland, “How I wish there we were offered on-campus accommodation and whole-day nursery services in the university!” As far as Dr. L is concerned, many universities in Mainland China are mother-friendly. They offer female academics with free or discounted on-campus accommodation and whole-day nursery services built inside the campus. Unfortunately, universities in Hong Kong do not provide such benefits or facilities at all. Besides the infrastructure, she felt that her work environment has not been supportive enough to mothers of young children either. For example, unlike female academics in Mainland China, working mothers in the university for which she is working do not have the luxury of having an extended lunch break during which mothers can

go home and breastfeed their infants. Due to the masculine work culture and mother-unfriendly work environment, Dr. L can only use her internal resources to sustain her career and motherhood, the two cornerstones that construct meaning in her life:

I work at my desk even when everyone is having lunch, but still I can only return home in the evening, sometimes feeling guilty. I rely heavily on my Filipino maid to take care of my baby. On Saturdays and Sundays, I try to spend all the time with my kid. My husband and I rarely have any leisure time now.

She predicted that life can be easier for her family as her child grows older, but the same cannot be said should she and her husband plan to have another child. She even felt that she should be thankful for being able to continue with her academic work. It is never easy for a mother to sustain her professorial position in a workplace that favours male academics, let alone having the chance for promotion.

Case study 3: Dr. H. The third interviewee was Dr. H, an assistant professor of psychology who has a 9-year-old son and a 13-month-old baby boy at the time when she had the interview. In the cafe where the interview took place, Dr. H ordered strong coffee because she felt particularly exhausted after delivering long lectures during the day, "To take good care of my kids and work as a full-time academic at university, on average, I can only sleep for 2 h every night." This means that Dr. H needs to sacrifice her rest time and health for her career and motherhood, should she want to keep them both. On being asked what motivates her to continue with her full-time job, she smiled and said:

My work is demanding and challenging, but I do find my research and teaching meaningful and enjoyable. Also, my husband is very supportive. It's important that he understands me and share my household duties.

However, parental encouragement can only be felt at home. The university for which she is working encourages rivalry and competition rather than nurturance and motherhood. Considering her 'family burdens' and the discouragingly small proportion of female academics who made it to the top positions in academia, she realizes that it may be pointless to think about career advancement in a masculine work culture:

You can take a look at the university website and see for yourself how many females made it to the top. At The University of Hong Kong, less than 20% of the senior leaders are female. Here at our university, the President, Provost, Vice-presidents are all males. Most Deans are males too, and many senior female academics are single and childless by situation, not by choice. Frankly, I rarely think about seeking promotion in my career anymore after becoming a mother. You know, the task of breastfeeding alone requires 35 hours every week. I already feel grateful for the job opportunity granted to me. I really do.

Similar to Dr. L, Dr. H is concerned about balancing her career and family. She understands that maternity is a financial liability and she is willing to make sacrifice for her motherhood. Nonetheless, the well-being of her children and family is her top priority; her career and academic accomplishment shall give way, if needs be. She has

accepted the lack of support for pregnancy and child rearing in her workplace as well. The masculine work culture has long been taken for granted in academia in Hong Kong and beyond, as she observed. She understood that it can take academic institutions generations to embrace gender equity and celebrate the feminine work culture, offering a mother-friendly work environment to all female academics.

5 Conclusion

Both the quantitative data and qualitative findings collected in this study indicate that the academia in Hong Kong is largely driven by the masculine work culture. For female academics, the academia is a long and winding road that grows increasingly sexist in time, especially when they want to start a family, have children, and carry on with their academic career. In face of the prejudice and hardship they are facing at work, some female academics may stay single and childless so as to earn the tenured professorship; some may delay childbearing in exchange for more time to develop their career; others may hire domestic maids to take care of their children (but at the expense of the family well-being of the foreign maids). Despite all this, the sexist and gender-imbalanced work environment is to the detriment of female academics' happiness, well-being, life plans in future, and ultimately their pursue for meaning in life. It is of utmost importance that universities promote gender equity through providing sufficient maternity benefits, flexible working hours, mother-friendly university facilities, and a healthy and sustainable performance measurement system that can encourage the autonomy, professional identity, and sense of achievement of all academics, male or female, regardless of their gender, marital status, or parental status.

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