

# Critical impact of maternity leave on female academics and researchers

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## Background

The under-appreciated impact of leave on female academics, specifically maternity leave, is a critical challenge within academia and research centres.

Despite ostensibly neutral interventions intended to provide allowances for employees unavailable for work due to maternity leave, evidence suggests that;

- (i) Family formation has far-reaching consequences for women's academic and research careers (Mason et al, 2013);
- (ii) Family leave arrangements are not always managed in ways that enable or facilitate women's career progression (Antecol et al, 2016);
- (iii) Institutional provisions to accommodate maternity leave do not adequately address the differential impacts family formation have on men and women (Ahmad, 2016).

## Aim & Objectives

The GENOVATE project undertook a survey on experiences of maternity leave amongst female academics and researchers in an Irish university. The research was undertaken with the intention to explore and raise awareness about:

- (i) The impact of pregnancy at work and maternity leave on female academic and research staff and;
- (ii) To propose recommendations that could be implemented to further gender equality amongst staff.

## Methodology

Qualitative online interviews undertaken with female academics and researchers in July & September 2014

## Sample

- 70 responses; 42 complete (41 taken maternity leave)
- Average Age: 42.47 years
- Average leave taken: 6.6 months
- Average age of youngest child: 5.52 years
- Median age of youngest child: 3 years.

This primary research was supplemented by a review of international literature.

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## Findings

**Gendered organisational culture coupled with effects of structural asymmetries in parental policy provisions marginalises maternity leave as a private matter for individual women to negotiate at local level.**

“Women are often left to deal with work load allocations themselves and to sort out exam marking arrangements, PG supervision etc. A lot depends on the good will and efficiency of a Head of Department and there should be a much more pro-active approach to ensuring fair treatment.”

“It deals with it (pregnancy & maternity leave) on a legal basis. It complies with the law. The lack of replacement for you while you're on mat leave means that you're enemy number one in your place because all your colleagues have got to pick up your work. It creates a rather tense environment.”

“As I said, my boss at the time, male, did not cause or create any issues around maternity leave. It was a positive experience. I returned to a busy job and got even busier. The problem is gender equity in \_\_\_\_\_, not maternity issues per se.”

**Informal attitudes at local level dictate women's experiences of pregnancy at work, taking maternity leave and accommodations on return to work.**

“I don't feel the working environment was particularly supportive, particularly on my return to work - it's 'business as usual' when you get back, teaching has usually been saved up for your return etc. etc. That said, some individual colleagues were supportive, but institutionally, there's not that much support.”

“Friendly on a personal level but unsupportive structurally. Had to find own replacement for teaching and supervision hours. Colleagues helped out, but these were more personal favours rather than any systematic intervention.”

“Remarkably, the attitude of my head of department was extremely negative, as I had two children in a row. I would go as far as to say that I was bullied and then placed in a position with high administration role purposely to make it impossible to cross the bar [i.e., progress to next academic grade].”

**Academic workplace cultures leave women taking maternity leave vulnerable to a range of penalties**

“During maternity leave I was asked to: i) prepare a new module to be given on my return to college; ii) my academic timetable was rearranged, so that I would give full academic workload on my return to college between January and March, without being informed previously; iii) supervise postdoc and attend meetings.”

“I didn't apply for senior lecturer, as I was on maternity leave when it was advertised and the application form was too much work to take on during my leave. I feel that I should have been allowed to apply upon my return but this was not an option. I was also not considered for roles within my department as I previously outlined. I had a lot of my own research work to carry during my leave which I found difficult to do.”

“Some of my workload was shifted to the second term, which meant that when I came back I had a lot more work than usual. This is quite hard as most women who are breastfeeding a baby know, especially when you are sleeping 4 hours a night, you come back to work, and you have double workload. And by workload, I am referring to teaching and admin work. Time for research was just a far away dream. This has a very negative impact on a woman's career progression opportunities.”

## GENOVATE Recommendations for Universities and Research Organisations

- Gender Equality should be central to policy and strategy with regard to maternity leave and all caring leave breaks;
- Guiding Principles for Organising and Managing Maternity Leave:
  - A standard and comprehensive approach to maternity leave should be applied to ensure consistency between *institutional* and *local* organisational and management approaches to maternity leave;
  - Guidelines, information and training should be provided to *line managers* as they play a key role in ensuring maternity and family leave is applied consistently at institutional and local levels.
  - Documented *procedures to address disadvantages* resulting from statutory periods of leave should be incorporated into all relevant processes, including (i) procedures for promotion and progression; (ii) processes involving assessments of research excellence. All documented procedures should provide guidelines for assessors and applicants;
  - *Human rights* protections should be an integral element of the organisation and management of maternity leave; maternity leave policy should be subject to periodic review to ensure compliance with rights protections and gender equality objectives.
  - See GENOVATE's resources for promoting gender equality: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/iss21/genovate/hub/>
- A Cross-University Working Group could be established to ensure gender equality principles remain at the heart of institutional development of policy on managing maternity leave - see: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/iss21/BriefingNote.ActionNo.5.ecopy.pdf>

## References

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