

Breaking the glass ceiling in academia:

The challenges female academics face at University

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*Our 'Big Science in Little Malta' article only featured male academics. This got us thinking, what about female academics at the University of Malta? For this **THINK** article, we want to take a closer look at the academic glass ceiling. What are some of the struggles female academics face? And what can we do to overcome these barriers?*

In October 1919, Tessi Camilleri, the University of Malta's (UM) first female student, enrolled. Today, almost 60% of all UM students are female. But that doesn't mean gender gaps are non-existent at the institution. The majority of the university's top management, deans, and directors are male.

Roderick Vassallo, co-chair of the Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee, explains: 'You'll see that there's quite a number of female academics at the bottom – assistants, lecturers, and senior lecturers. But they start fizzling out at the top.'

THE NATURE OF PROMOTIONS

A lot of it boils down to the way promotions are given. When it comes to professorship, a promotion is given based on research conducted, administration work, and teaching hours.

Research is given way more importance than the other two. 'If you don't have research published in international journals, you might find that you will not be given a promotion,' Vassallo says.

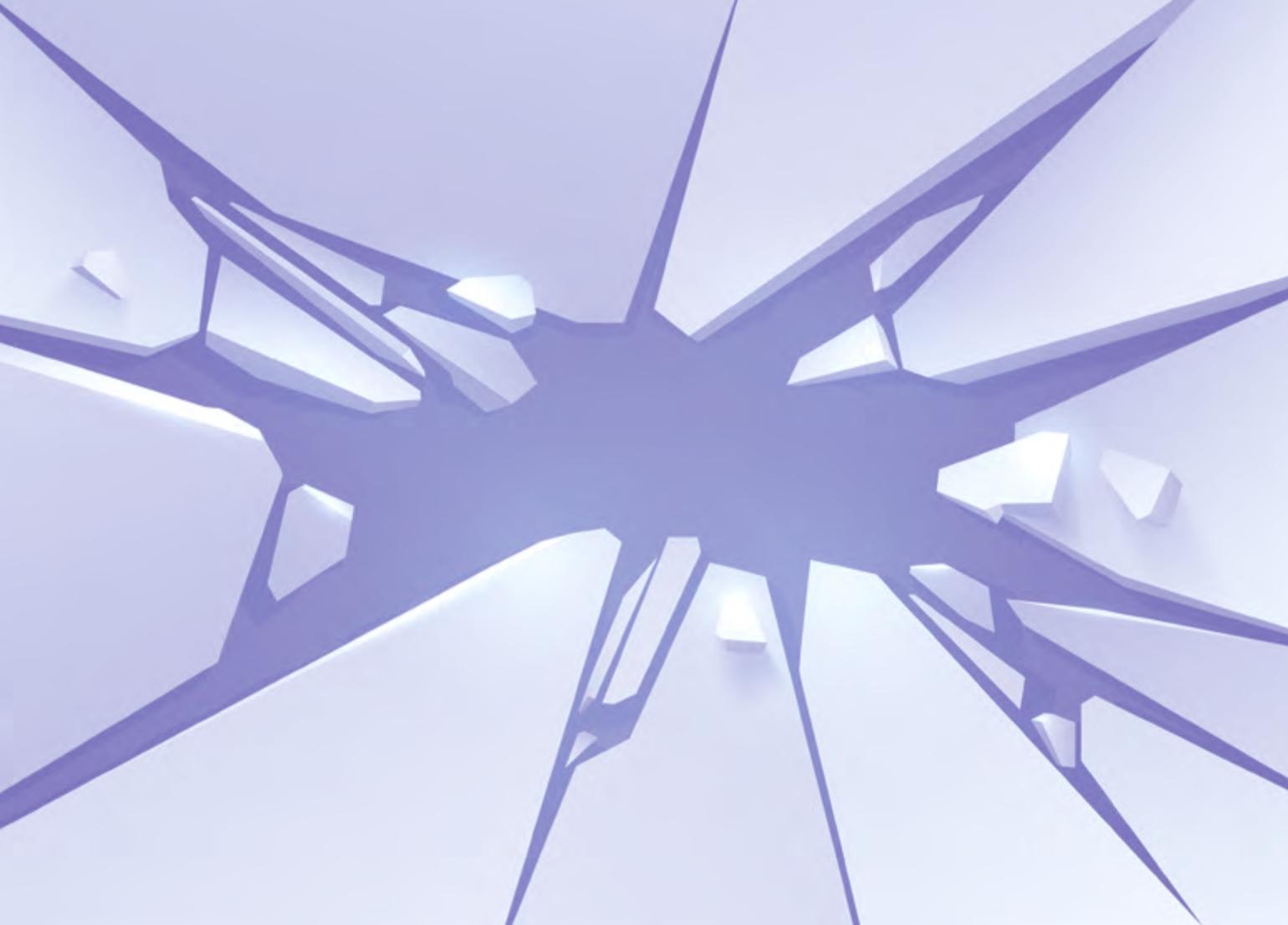
JosAnn Cutajar, associate professor in Gender and Sexualities, says: 'Women do very well in teaching. But when it comes to assessment, nobody in university gives promotions on the basis of your teaching acumen.'

WORKING WEEKENDS

On top of that, the current standards are mainly shaped by men. In order to get a promotion, you are expected to work overtime and during weekends – something most men can afford due to societal gender roles.

But that's not the case for everyone. Artificial Intelligence lecturer Dr Claudia Borg says: 'I consider myself lucky to be single. It gives me the opportunity to work over the weekend if I want to. I really can't imagine myself doing the same amount of work if I had a family.'

'But why should a promotion depend on my work on the weekend? Why can't a promotion be based on working my 40-hour job? The bar is set high by those who have the time to work overtime, but it shouldn't be there



for everyone. The bar should be where we consider it reasonable in terms of output,' Borg continues.

'These are the ways in which university doesn't support academics. These issues are creating division. There is a gap between those able to do overtime and those who can't because they have a life and a family outside their job.'

WHY DOES THIS IMPACT WOMEN?

These things impact women more than men because in general women are expected to take care of the kids. Kids are time-consuming. 'Some are lucky and have a more balanced load, but parenthood in general more strongly impacts the mother,' Borg said.

Vassallo strongly agrees. 'We need to constantly invest energy and mechanisms to help people understand

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That isn't the only way motherhood infringes on women's promotion prospects or recruitment. Cutajar says, 'If you are female, employers will ask you: "What is your fertility plan?"'

Vassallo confirms that this doesn't happen at UM — it is in fact illegal — but Borg has experienced it before in other companies. 'We've had to deal with it time and time again. I have been in a position where I sat

for an interview and was specifically asked: "Do you have children?" or: "Why did you get married?"'

The problem is cultural, Vassallo says. 'The idea that the family is always dumped on the female counterpart is wrong. Why is the female always in charge?'

PAY GAP

Part of the reason women are more likely to stay home with the children is the pay gap. In Malta, men are paid 12% more on average 



for the same job as women. 'If my husband is earning more for the same job, I'm going to give up my job because he earns more, which is better for the family,' Borg explains.

At university, the gender pay gap exists in indirect ways. 'On paper, there isn't a pay gap. In practice, there probably is. Because women will always fall back on not having time to apply for funds and projects,' Borg says. 'The gap comes in at projects where your time is actually paid. The more time you have to work and apply for funding, the more likely you are to receive additional payment for your work.'

Cutajar adds, 'There are other things you can be doing, like being the Head of Department. The majority of Head of Departments and assistant deans are men. So they get an allowance for extra duties.'

COMMUNITY CARE

The University of Malta Academic Staff Association (UMASA) has proposed a more holistic approach towards promotions. This would still include a focused approach on research output, but it would also include the option of taking a balanced approach that gives weight either to an academic's commitment to university, society, and the academic profession or to demonstrated quality in teaching. The existing promotions criteria will again be up for review when the next collective agreement is discussed.

Many female academics are involved in community issues. 'Research around the world underlines that female academics spend more time with students and advocating for vulnerable social groups,' says Cutajar.

Unfortunately, taking community work into consideration hasn't been operationalised yet. 'That is, we don't know on which basis you can get a promotion. We haven't been told what amount of hours equals a promotion,' Cutajar says.

There is also the community within UM to take into account. Helping students is another area that doesn't currently factor into promotions, but perhaps should.

'We have students with awful problems – suicide, matrimonial issues, abortion... Two of my students had girlfriends who had an abortion, so they couldn't cope. We've had a student who got divorced because her husband didn't allow her to continue her studies,' Cutajar says.

Spending time and effort on helping students infringes on lecturers' time to do research. Patricia Hill Collins, an American academic specializing in race, class, and gender, said, 'If you want to proceed in academia, don't provide any social help.'

GLASS ESCALATOR

'It doesn't only depend on the amount of time men and women have to spend on their academic careers. Though there is definitely a glass ceiling in academia, there is also such a thing as a glass escalator,' Cutajar explains.

'As a lecturer, your role model is a professor. When you look up and just see men, you think: "oh my god, I'm never going to get there." We have glass ceilings, but men have glass escalators.'

She elaborates by giving the example of social work 'Social workers are usually female. When men go into this field, they usually don't spend as much time at the bottom – they will get to the top really fast. The same in academia: it takes female academics more time than men to reach their goal.'

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

The issue goes beyond rules and expectations – it is culturally ingrained. 'We call it internalised oppression,' Cutajar says. Internalised oppression occurs when women think that they are not capable as decision makers.

Borg also spoke about the fact that academics and students are concentrated in some fields and not others. We are socially ingrained to think that engineering is for men, nursing for women. Some parents tell their daughters: 'Don't take computing, that's for boys.'

'I have experienced setbacks, but I can't always pinpoint whether those setbacks are because I am a woman. The thing is that we have a lot of unconscious biases when it comes to gender,' Borg says.

Not all departments are working equally to diversify their lecturing staff. This results in embedding our pre-existing biases. Without diversification, we develop tunnel vision. Issues that do not directly affect our group are sidelined and ignored.

'In our faculty, out of 46 lecturers, three are women, and they are all within a single department. There's an unconscious bias.' And as the criteria for the promotions aren't strictly defined, it leaves space for that same unconscious bias.



Dr Claudia Borg

No one will literally say: 'There's a female application; it's not right to promote her yet. Let's promote this male applicant.'

'But if you are looking at the female's CV and you see 10 publications, and then you see 50 publications on a male CV straight after, you will likely think she didn't do enough. Although she may have done a lot of administration, or maybe she has 50 teaching hours.'

A panel made up exclusively of men is more likely to hire a male candidate. We are more likely to select a candidate based on how we identify, whether that's race, religion, or gender identity. It is precisely for this reason that diverse interviewing panels are needed: to overcome our unconscious bias.

SOLUTIONS

From the way promotions are granted to unconscious bias, there are many factors that lead to women being underrepresented in the upper part of academia. Luckily, there are plenty of solutions that can break this glass ceiling.

Borg, Cutajar, and Vassallo agree that there needs to be more transparency in the way promotions are given, as only the amount of publications is set on paper. Marks should be given for teaching hours, community work, and administrative work, too.

Another important step towards gender equality is equal pay and equal maternity and paternity leave.

'We need the responsibility of the child to be equally distributed between the father and the mother. Then, anyone who will be interviewed who has a child will be liable for the same thing, not just the woman,' said Vassallo.

'And more complaints', Vassallo adds. Cutajar continues, 'When men complain, they listen.' Borg replies, 'When women complain, we are considered hysterical females. Of course I am the hysterical female complaining. We're not going to move forward unless we are shouting.' If we want to move forward, we need to be shouting together. **T**