

THE COST OF CAREGIVING: FAMILY STATUS AND THE PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO EDI IN CANADIAN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Although the discourse of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has been formally embraced in post-secondary institutional contexts in Canada and globally, the policies and practices that would tangibly manifest these principles remain uneven. Indeed, EDI data collection tools and initiatives often neglect to consider some human-rights protected grounds, such as family status, as intersections of interest. Extant human rights jurisprudence continues to place the onus on the employee to engage individual accommodations processes in the absence of system-wide, family-friendly policies that recognize the added care responsibilities shouldered by academic parents, and mothers specifically. Yet, increasingly, academic institutions are being called upon to adopt family-friendly policies, practices, and cultures. The characteristics of a family-friendly institution, however, remain disputed and opaque, and the pace to realize EDI goals remains glacial. This article explores dimensions of the family-friendly academic institution and explains why its implementation is so necessary in the Canadian academic context. We argue that academic institutions and grant-funding bodies need to better account for the impact of caregiving responsibilities to meet the stated goals of their EDI action plans to contribute to a fair and diverse research ecosystem.

Keywords: academic mothers, caregiving, educational policy, family-friendly institutions, family status, human rights, equity, diversity and inclusion

Résumé

Bien que le discours sur l'équité, la diversité et l'inclusion (EDI) ait été officiellement adopté dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur au Canada et ailleurs dans le monde, les politiques et les pratiques qui concrétiseraient ces principes demeurent inégales. En effet, les outils de collecte de données et les initiatives sur l'EDI omettent souvent de considérer certains éléments protégés par les droits de la personne, comme le statut

familial, en tant que recoupements dignes d'intérêt. En l'absence de politiques systémiques favorisant la conciliation entre vie familiale et vie professionnelle – reconnaissant les responsabilités familiales accrues assumées par les parents chercheurs universitaires, en particulier les mères –, la jurisprudence existante en matière de droits de la personne continue de laisser le fardeau d'entreprendre des démarches d'accommodement individuelles aux employés. Pourtant, les établissements universitaires sont de plus en plus appelés à adopter des politiques, des pratiques et des cultures conciliantes pour les familles. Les caractéristiques d'un établissement conciliant pour les familles demeurent toutefois controversées et opaques, et les progrès vers l'atteinte des objectifs d'EDI demeurent d'une extrême lenteur. Cet article explore les dimensions d'un établissement universitaire conciliant pour la famille et explique pourquoi sa mise en œuvre est si nécessaire dans le contexte universitaire canadien. Nous soutenons que les établissements universitaires et les organismes subventionnaires doivent mieux tenir compte de l'incidence des responsabilités parentales pour atteindre les objectifs énoncés dans leurs plans d'action en matière d'EDI et contribuer à un écosystème de recherche équitable et diversifié.

Mots-clés : mères chercheuses universitaires, responsabilités familiales, politiques éducatives, équité, diversité et inclusion, établissements conciliants pour les familles, statut familial, droits de la personne

INTRODUCTION

Although the discourse of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has been formally embraced in post-secondary institutional contexts in Canada and globally, the policies and practices that would tangibly manifest these principles remain uneven. Many universities have, over the past few decades, responded to human rights legislation that mandates that they collect data on EDI and monitor their progress toward becoming more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces, particularly as a means to receive federal research funding. Although some research indicates that post-secondary institutions may have achieved a measure of progress toward this goal (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019)—albeit at a glacially slow pace (Ogden, 2025)—inconsistencies emerge across institutions, as do gaps in the operationalization and enactment of EDI for various groups (al Shaibah, 2014).

One important gap that has emerged is that EDI initiatives have often neglected the protected ground of family status (often defined in hu-

man rights legislation as being in a parent–child relationship; Shilton, 2013) and its intersections with other protected grounds (e.g., gender identity or expression, race or ethnic origin, disability, sexual orientation). This may not be surprising given that the Employment Equity Act (1995) in Canada confines equity-seeking groups to four categories alone (i.e., women, racialized groups, Indigenous persons, and persons with disabilities), even while the inclusion of other intersectional identities has been recommended (Blackett, 2023). Extant Canadian human rights jurisprudence continues to place the onus on employees to engage in individual accommodation processes with their employers in the absence of system-wide policies that recognize the added care responsibilities shouldered by parents, and mothers specifically. These gaps in how we measure and understand EDI have significant implications for its progress in Canadian academic institutions and for the quality and diversity of knowledge and science produced in them.

While there has been a proliferation of literature on the systemic barriers facing caregivers in academia over the past few years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., James et al., 2021), few studies have concretely elucidated viable remedies to them, although frequently the term “family-friendly institution” (e.g., Lester & Sallee, 2023) is raised. Indeed, increasingly institutions of higher education are being called upon to adopt family-friendly policies, practices, and cultures (in Canada, Smith-Carrier et al., 2021a; and in the United States, Bodkin & Fleming, 2021), yet the nature and characteristics of the “family-friendly institution” remain disputed and opaque (Su & Bozeman, 2016). Some policies, such as tenure clock extensions, can have contradictory effects on those they intend to aid.

The purpose of this review is to explore the important yet fraught progress toward creating family-friendly institutions in the Canadian academic context. Given the harms documented in Canadian studies (e.g., fatigue, burnout, adverse mental health implications) associated with academic parents’ relentless engagement in caregiving work (Davis et al., 2022; Gaudet et al., 2022), and unsupportive academic work cultures that fail to recognize or remedy these (Wilton & Ross, 2017), we argue that academic institutions shift toward a family-friendly orientation, one that goes beyond individual accommodations to embrace system-wide policies and practices that are more mindful and inclusive of those with caregiving responsibilities.

We adopt a narrative review method to understand the implications of neglecting family status as a core category in EDI, including its relationship with key academic practices (such as publishing or research travel), and build an argument for the creation of new practices and supports within academic institutions. Our review summarizes how caregiving roles for Canadian academics create deep inequities, particularly for academic mothers, before examining the characteristics of a family-friendly institution and the complexity of policies that can support this transition. While we included research on academic caregivers and academic institutions globally, we focused our search on Canadian academics where this was avail-

able. The timing of this review is significant given the recent proliferation of studies since the COVID-19 pandemic, which identified the ways in which the health emergency had disproportionate impact on caregivers; impacts that continue to beleaguer academic parents in the post-COVID era. Indeed, recently, we have witnessed significant political pushback against equity initiatives (Government of Alberta, 2025) and EDI more broadly (Bryan & Lyons, 2025). Yet a retreat from the principles and practices of EDI may make it all the more difficult to recognize and address the persistent barriers caregivers recurrently encounter in the academic work setting.

EDI AND CAREGIVING IN ACADEMIA

Although the lack of diversity within academia has been well-documented in the literature for decades (Henry et al., 2017; Mahtani, 2006), institutions of higher education in Canada did not embark on serious steps to remedy the disproportionate underrepresentation of members of equity-seeking groups until quite recently. For the purposes of this article, Meyer’s (2016) definition of “woman” is applied, which includes any person who identifies as a woman (gender) and/or any person who is biologically female (sex) that may be subject to gender discrimination, such as birthing mothers.

The Dimensions Charter (Government of Canada, 2019, para. 4), which identifies the equity-seeking groups described in the *Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan for 2018–2025* (Government of Canada, 2023), asserts that:

Fundamental to achieving results is the need to identify and address systemic barriers, particularly those experienced by members of underrepresented or disadvantaged groups including, but not limited to, women, Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), persons with disabilities, members of visible minority/racialized groups and members of LGBTQ2+ communities. (Objective 1, footnote 1)

As is apparent, family status is not identified as an intersection of interest in the description noted above. Yet, erstwhile representations of diversity, such as that documented by Chan (2005), for example, do appear to embrace such status: “Diversity includes race, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and disability, with additional considerations of religion, education, and *family and marital status* [emphasis added]” (p. 130). The omission of family status in the present operationalization of EDI is regrettable given that this intersection, perhaps unlike any other marker of identity, is not only subject to systemic discrimination (akin to other human rights-protected grounds) but is also laden with significant labour disadvantages.

INEQUITIES FOR ACADEMIC WOMEN

The literature on the gendered differences between women and men professors globally is substantial. Research in Canada affirms that women professors, relative to their men counterparts, shoulder much of the “academic housework” (featuring administrative load and community and emotional service activities) and care practices in the academy (Gaudet et al., 2022), the very practices that allow it to effectively function. They are more likely than professors who are men to assume mentorship roles, organize meetings, engage in committee work, and take on greater teaching duties (Kaufman & Colyar, 2022). Owing to the under-valuing of these commitments in relation to more venerable activities, such as research production, and ongoing gender bias, women are less likely, compared to men, to be promoted up the ranks (Statistics Canada, 2019) and channelled into senior administrative positions (Momani et al., 2019).

The Canadian literature demonstrates that women professors produce a lesser quantity of publications than men, and the returns on their research are also lower, yielding less for women in terms of pay and ranking (Wiedman, 2019). Even when women progress to elite research roles, such as research chairs, levels of produc-

tivity and particularly recognition (via citations) remain stratified by gender, with men researchers in the lead in both areas in one comparative study of Canada, the United States, and South Africa (Sá et al., 2020; see also King & Frederickson, 2021). When women do submit their research to peer-reviewed journals, they are more likely to be subject to gender bias in the peer review process, and according to researchers in the United States, “must be 2.5 times as productive to be judged as equally competent in grant applications” (Malisch et al., 2020, p. 15380). Canadian women academics also continue to receive lower pay (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2018) and less in retirement contributions than men (Penner & Smith-Carrier, 2022; Smith-Carrier et al., 2021b). Although women are just as likely as men to attain tenure at Canadian universities, they are less likely to be promoted to the rank of full professor (Stewart et al., 2009) or be awarded venerable research chair positions (Kaufman & Colyar, 2022; Sá et al., 2020). Owing to significant gender inequities, there remains a significant “power gap” in Canadian society, with women “outnumbered, outranked, and out-earned” (Doolittle & Wang, 2021, para. 2) in all public sector institutions, including universities.

Alongside gendered inequities, disparities exist in academia along racial lines as well, which has led to an overrepresentation of White men and women in senior administrative roles, while racialized men and women have been relegated to the lower administrative ranks (see Fuji Johnson & Howsam, 2020). Pay gaps among racialized faculty are significant relative to White faculty, with racialized women assigned the deepest wage penalty (CAUT, 2018). Given that women faculty, and racialized women faculty specifically, are more frequently asked to engage in service work (e.g., mentoring students, participating in committee work, drafting meeting minutes, planning social events, etc.) compared to men in the professoriate (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017), they often have significantly less time to engage in research and knowledge dissemination processes. Researchers must also engage in regular research travel to take up opportunities to give a keynote address or

to expand their networks and collaborations at prestigious inter/national conferences. These activities, however, are far more difficult in both time and resource costs when one is also saddled with caregiving responsibilities.

THE COST OF CAREGIVING: INEQUITIES FACING ACADEMIC MOTHERS

During and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a veritable surge of research capturing the experiences of academic mothers globally. The health emergency not only highlighted the immense caregiving load mothers carried compared to those without such responsibilities, even academic fathers (Gordon & Presseau, 2023), but it also exacerbated it (Minello et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2021). Research affirms that over this time women academics were clearly disadvantaged, relative to men, in undertaking active programs of research in Canada (Davis et al., 2022; De Giusti Bordignon & Viczko, 2024) and globally (Derrick et al., 2022), with women's disproportionate share of caregiving and emotional labour presenting as key contributors (in Canada, Gordon & Presseau, 2023; in the United States, Dolan & Lawless, 2020).

Lumped in among all women who may or may not have caregiving responsibilities in the academic workplace, the physical realities of raising children or caring for extended family members necessitate specific, additional forms of labour that those without caregiving duties are not required to engage in (Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2020). These responsibilities typically reside with mothers. Fathers may in fact benefit from this arrangement. As American researchers Mason and Goulden (2004) put it, “‘Married with children’ is the success formula for men, but the opposite is true for women, for whom there is a serious ‘baby gap’” (p. 11). This may be the reason that women in academia have been found to be the least likely of all employment professions to have children (Hallstein & O'Reilly, 2012). While the sources quoted above derive from research in the United States, Canadian researchers have documented similar trends (see Hillier,

2021). Gordon and Presseau (2023) found, in a survey collected over the COVID-19 pandemic from 899 academics from across Canada in 2020, that mothers with young children reported having fewer uninterrupted work hours, publications, and grant submissions compared to academic fathers, adversely affecting not only their research productivity but their mental health. These results are consonant with those reported by Davis et al. (2022), who documented the pronounced impacts of caregiving on academic mothers' research productivity, which were most acutely felt by pre-tenured faculty. Yet, while productivity levels took a significant hit for this group, the metrics applied to assess these have only increased, raising the bar and the pressure on women facing significant burnout and stress (De Giusti Bordignon & Viczko, 2024).

Regardless of rank, academic mothers report feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and failure endeavouring to meet their academic demands as they concomitantly engage in ongoing caregiving work (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). For mothers in general, such labour does not only include the tangible, visible demands of caregiving (e.g., meal preparation, shopping, cleaning, etc.), but also those invisible and difficult to quantify, such as emotional labour (e.g., soothing children, listening to others' concerns, etc.) and added mental work (e.g., checklists for appointments, organizing play dates, etc.; in Canada, Gaudet et al., 2022; in the United States, Hartley, 2018).

The “second shift” of mothers, as described by American researchers Hochschild and Machung (2012), necessitating that they not only perform the duties assigned to them in the paid work domain but also in the unpaid home domain as well, was compounded by the emergence of a “third shift” over the COVID-19 pandemic, one that not only required their continuous emotional and mental labour, but also the need to be flexible to adopting new roles (e.g., as tutor to one's children). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Thébaud et al. (2024) found that the share of childcare responsibilities of academic mothers during the pandemic, in a sample at a large U.S. research-intensive university, were not only substantially more in terms of the number of

hours worked relative to that of fathers, but they were also “qualitatively different, with women’s hours being more unpredictable, interruptive, and mentally and emotionally demanding” (p. 181), exacting a higher toll on mothers’ time and mental well-being. Brewer et al. (2023) similarly noted a decline in job satisfaction, and in mental and physical health, among academic mothers in the United States during the health emergency; this resonates with reflective accounts of academic motherhood from the Canadian context (see also Pimentel & Bel Hadj Ali, 2025).

In their qualitative study with academic mothers, Gaudet et al. (2022) capture the code of silence surrounding the health issues (i.e., physical and psychological conditions, including post-partum depression, pneumonia, cancer, burnout, etc.) mothers often carried and which they worked hard to hide. They often did not take the sick leave provisions available to them and even refused to take the time needed to receive proper care and treatment for their health issues to avoid disclosures to their supervisors and colleagues. This is consistent with research by Wilton and Ross (2017), who found that aspiring to meet the expectations of Canadian universities has a profoundly detrimental impact on women’s health as compared to men’s. Women experience more stress and pressures as mothers than their men colleagues do as fathers.

Universities reflect entrenched gendered work norms and feminized structures of care, as revealed so palpably during the pandemic (Davis et al., 2022; Gaudet et al., 2022). Care work is certainly not confined to raising children, as elder care is also heavily feminized (Burke, 2017). However, the role of the elite researcher is one that typically requires significant travel. The pressures in some science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines, ones in which ongoing field work is required, can be particularly challenging for academic mothers given clear constraints on their flexibility to work from home (Effah & Kaufman, 2022). Researchers may opt out of commitments to engage in field work, knowledge dissemination, and/or networking activities, but with attendant consequences for their research profile and thus

ability to succeed in their bid for tenure or a research chair. For example, James et al. (2021) interviewed academic mothers in Canada who were hard-pressed to engage in conference travel and/or ethnographic field work, not only during the first year following their child’s birth but two to three years afterward, given the difficulties of juggling their work and care responsibilities. Derrick et al.’s (2022) international study highlighted that “travel as a way of maintaining visibility in the discipline and maintain[ing] collaborations, was found to be one of the most difficult academic responsibilities for parents to conduct” (p. 9). While there can be considerable flexibility afforded to academic mothers in Canada (e.g., to work from home, around teaching schedules, etc.), this can often be dependent on the stage of one’s career, with the pressures associated with tenure and progression immense, leaving little time for self-care or even good sleep (Smith-Carrier et al., 2021a).

The experiences of racialized and queer academic mothers are sorely lacking in the research literature, and Canadian contexts specifically, as are academic mothers impacted by financial and/or health constraints, as many studies do not specifically feature these groups. Wagner et al. (2022) document the experiences of disabled academic mothers in the United States over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and found they recurrently confronted ableism in the academy and experienced increased isolation due to having to manage challenging impairments, which then heightened their levels of anxiety and stress.

WHAT NEXT? CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY INSTITUTIONS

Many studies, particularly those in the United States, refer to the need for family-friendly policies and practices, yet often do not define or unpack these in detail (Su & Bozeman, 2016). There are some aspects that appear consistently in the literature, however, including tenure

clock extension policies, un/paid leaves, flexible workloads, family-related travel provisions, and childcare provisions.

Tenure Clock Extension Policies

Extensions to the tenure clock feature prominently in the literature on academic parenting, yet whether these help or hinder mothers' (and parents') progression through the ranks is equivocal. Canadian researchers James et al. (2021) find that academic mothers who seek to take advantage of extensions on the tenure clock "often face negative consequences in terms of tenure and promotion, and struggle transitioning back to work following leave" (p. 87). This is confirmed in the U.S. literature (Manchester et al., 2013).

In the United States, Holland et al. (2024) have found that tenure clock extensions make academics feel that "they must both run farther and climb higher" (p. 1) in their careers, as the intensifying research demands in academia "defeats the purpose of 'stopping the tenure clock' in the first place" (Fothergill & Feltey, 2003, p. 9). As such, Holland et al. (2024) argue for policies that (a) give faculty members the ability to opt out of extensions if not required; (b) offer clear, objective standards for tenure, irrespective of timelines; (c) provide extensions on research funding; (d) provide research assistant funds to keep research projects moving; and (e) ensure pay equity. We would add that universities are long overdue for a reimagining of the metrics applied to assess academic productivity, noting a particular need to rebalance the scales that perpetually favour high-ranking research contributions above all else, such that all the other vital work (e.g., actionable knowledge translation, teaching, service, mentorship, committee work, etc.) is devalued, as are those who persistently engage in this work.

Reduced or Flexible Workloads

Flexible or reduced workloads (including compressed work weeks, telework, job sharing, modified duties, etc.) are frequently discussed in the research on family-friendly institutions (Bodkin & Fleming, 2021; Brewer et al., 2023;

Manchester et al., 2013). Feeney et al. (2014) suggest, in the context of STEM, however, that without changes to the culture of institutions to encourage the uptake of such provisions, their utilization and effectiveness remain uncertain. Flexible or reduced workloads may result in academic parents, particularly mothers, taking on even more household and childcare duties, but at a reduced salary in the case of reduced workloads. Many academics on reduced workloads report taking lower pay but still working nearly full-time hours.

Academic Travel

Data collection, networking, and conference travel are particularly challenging for caregiving researchers. Carter et al. (2024) argued that granting bodies be more (a) *flexible*, by permitting expenses related to registered childminders caring for dependents during academic travel or the costs of dependent(s)' travel, and trusting parents to use such funds as needed to meet their individual circumstances; (b) *adaptable*, by providing opportunities for grant holders to apply retroactively for added care costs for dependents and travel arrangements should situations change; (c) *comprehensive*, by developing family-friendly funding policies that provide funding support for all early-career scientists (i.e., PhD students, post-doctoral researchers, junior faculty); and (d) *transparent*, by requiring institutions to consistently implement funders' policies that support childcare responsibilities to ensure greater equity (para. 8).

Some provisions for caregiving researchers exist in Canada, but these are often unclear or inadequate. While the *Tri-Agency Guide on Financial Administration* (Government of Canada, 2025) offers discretion to institutions to administer funds according to the guide's principles (including leave provisions to attend to family-related responsibilities), it provides little instructive guidance on travel-related costs for academic parents. It sets out general principles on the need for: (a) justified, (b) economical research expenses that (c) do not lead to "personal gain," a broad concept that intersects with the fuzzy work/home and individual/family boundaries of

an academic caregiver. The guide does not explicitly name childcare or dependent care costs as eligible expenses, instead pointing grant holders back to their own—highly variable—home university policies. The *Canada Research Chairs Administration Guide* (exclusively for the Canada Research Chairs program), by contrast, explicitly provides for travel expense reimbursement for a nursing mother or single parent to cover childcare or airfare to enable them to travel for research (Government of Canada, 2026a). However, this support is limited to narrow circumstances as it presupposes that researchers who may not choose to nurse or have a partner (and/or more than one child) do not need travel support. Such stipulations may be problematic for families with young children, children with diverse learning and/or health needs, or for parents who both work long hours.

Historically, research travel costs have been borne by the researcher's family unit by a stay-at-home (usually a woman) spouse supporting her partner's work travel, or by extended family networks that academics are less likely to have locally, given that most academics are required to relocate through their career to take up academic posts. Many Canadian academics today, particularly those confronting declining real wages (CAUT, 2024) and intensifying housing and childcare costs, are in dual-earner families (for national statistics, see Statista, 2025). Within this context, travel can contribute added stress, while also engendering significant strain on finances. Yet, such financial strain is not generally considered by academic institutions and grant-funding agencies, likely vestiges of an enduring belief that full-time academics are more than fairly compensated for their work (Brown, 2012). Depending on where in Canada one takes up an academic position, the cost of living can be substantial (Dobson, 2024), leaving few financial resources available to engage the seemingly unrestricted research travel expectations placed on an academic and their family. Individual factors, such as nearby relatives, inherited wealth, and lower cost of living in some towns/cities, significantly affect the ability to bear these costs, posing strong structural barriers for those who do not have them.

Some universities have explored options that permit greater flexibility for academic parents to fund travel-related dependent care. Brown University in the United States, for example, offers awards (taxable benefits) up to \$1,500 annually to assist full-time faculty with travel expenses, allowing them to potentially bring a caregiver on a research/conference trip, or provide extra support at home while a researcher is away (Brown University, 2025).

Un/paid Leave

Opportunities for un/paid leave are regularly featured in the U.S. scholarship on family-friendly institutions (e.g., Bodkin & Fleming, 2021), and while we lack specific numbers on uptake in Canadian universities, such leave provisions appear to be utilized broadly by mothers and parents in academia (difference in top-ups to standard Employment Insurance [EI] provisions varies by institution, however). Yet “a convincing body of experimental and qualitative research shows that employers hold biased assumptions about mothers’ job commitment and competency” (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019, p. 8). The uptake of career breaks, often for the purposes of maternity/parental leave, are generally still regarded as negative blights on an otherwise linearly privileged “ideal worker” career trajectory (in the United States, Brewer et al., 2023; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

The tri-agency grant-funding bodies (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council [NSERC], and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [SSHRC]) provide space for applicants to acknowledge career interruptions or special circumstances that may have interfered with researchers’ scholarly production, such as maternity/parental leave(s) (see Government of Canada, 2019). It is uncertain, however, how many academic mothers voluntarily identify that they have incurred these, and whether they carry meaningful weight, aside from being noted in the adjudication of a funding or tenure/promotion application. Some concrete recognition mechanisms do exist. While determining early-career research status and

eligibility for Tier 2 Canada Research Chairs, all eligible leaves (including maternity and parental leaves) are credited at twice the amount of time taken (Government of Canada, 2026d). Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council grant holders who take family-related or medical leave may also request an extension of the period for using their funds for up to two years (Government of Canada, 2026c). That said, the uptake of such leaves may not present opportunities to put a full pause on one's academic career. Jones and Floyd's (2023) secondary analysis of global survey data found that, despite statutory and institutional policy obligations to ensure maternity rights, women academics continue to perform their academic work while on their maternity/parental leave given the immense pressure on them to meet productivity expectations. If such interruptions did not pose such immense penalties for mothers' career trajectories, they may perhaps be more inclined to fully embrace them, and in so doing, not be overly burdened by having to engage multiple workloads simultaneously. However, the caregiver role does not end when a maternity/parental leave does, and university policies rarely, if ever, reflect the fact that the time impacts of care responsibilities extend far beyond the first 12–18 months of a child's life. As is evident here, family status presents unique barriers—ones not germane to academics without care responsibilities—that may not be adequately accounted for by academic institutions and the funding bodies on which they depend.

At an institutional level, negotiated collective agreements that determine pay rates while mothers are on maternity/parental leave are one avenue for reform. Canadian legislation mandates that employers provide a period of leave of up to 52 weeks of combined maternity (17 weeks) and parental leave (35 weeks) for standard leave (at a reduced EI rate) or a combined 78 weeks (extended leave at a further reduced EI rate). While this system represents a significant improvement on the lack of federal paid parental leave in the United States, it still creates challenges for Canadian academic mothers. During the time when they are recovering from birth, healing, and providing care for an infant(s), all el-

igible Canadian employees are entitled to claim EI, which is set to 55% of their current salary to a *maximum* of \$729 a week in 2026. This amount is then taxed, so the actual take-home pay is less (Canada, 2026b). As a point of reference, rent for a two-bedroom apartment in North Vancouver was \$3,336 in July 2026, so the maximum EI amount after-tax would not cover the average asking rent or a mortgage payment (Hette, 2026). While most Canadian universities “top up” this EI payment for birthing parents for the first 17 weeks to 95–100% salary, the parental leave (ranging from a further 35–61 weeks) is subject to highly variable top-ups from institution to institution, ranging from just three weeks at the University of Calgary (20 weeks total; University of Calgary, 2022), 12 weeks at York University (29 weeks total; York University, 2021), and 35 weeks at the University of Northern British Columbia (52 weeks total; University of Northern British Columbia, 2023). The financial pressures caused by short top-up durations likely incentivize mothers to return to work before they might be fully ready, with the potential of compounding their levels of stress and burnout.

Childcare

On-campus childcare (or subsidized access or referrals to local options) is often cited in the research on family-friendly universities (e.g., Bodkin & Fleming, 2021; Dolamore et al., 2021). While there are many academic institutions in Canada that have onsite or affiliated childcare centres that faculty and students can access (e.g., University of Toronto, n.d.; Western University, n.d.), and/or childcare subsidies (e.g., McMaster University, n.d.), there are a few that do not, and for those that do, waitlists can be long (Venne, 2023).

Family-Friendly Cultures

Universities are subject to “attitudinal and organizational prejudices” (Ballenger, 2010, p. 3) that pose barriers to women and academic mothers. The literature notes how changes made to physical spaces (e.g., changing and nursing stations), and the culture of institutions

(Eversole & Crowder, 2020) can make them more conducive to parents caring for infants and more welcoming of children and families (e.g., family-friendly programs and events; Cook, 2010). While there may be formal policies that faculty can access to engage their family-related obligations, informal unsupportive cultures can deter people from embracing them. Workplace norms, institution size, and institution type (e.g., research intensive, liberal arts, etc.) all play a significant role in shaping faculty members' use of formal policies, and their perceptions of support. Su and Bozeman (2016) found that chairs in the STEM fields in the United States, for example, had limited knowledge of family-friendly policies and faced different constraints and incentives in supporting and pursuing more of them. Notably, departments were more likely to embrace family-friendly policies if they had a diversity strategy in place.

Other Aspects of Family-Friendly Institutions

Other family-friendly components are reflected in the research literature, albeit not consistently; for example, spousal hiring assistance, part-time work options (Su & Bozeman, 2016), elder care referrals and community partnerships (in the United States, Cook, 2010), creation of affinity groups (Pimentel & Bel Hadj Ali, 2025), dependent sick leave provisions (in the United States, Sallee, 2013), pay equity, and equal opportunities for career advancement (Council of Canadian Academies, 2024). To appraise whether existing practices and policies are family-friendly, Brewer et al. (2023) argue that departmental and university-wide audits are recommended, with procedures initiated that are more responsive to faculty (see also Bender et al., 2022; Derrick et al., 2022) and that promote their health and well-being (Gaudet et al., 2022). Llorens et al. (2021) suggest, in considering how to effectively tackle gender bias in the academy, that the removal of systemic barriers will likely require action and accountability at all levels (i.e., individual, department, institution, government, funding agency, union, and international association).

DISCUSSION

A wide range of family-friendly policies presented here exist to varying degrees across the Canadian academic landscape. However, they are unevenly distributed, supported, and are not always effective. Despite having EDI initiatives in place, systemic barriers faced by academic parents persist. There are important roles for actors at all scales to address these issues. Moving forward, it would be judicious if institutions and national funding agencies consider not only expanding these targets to include those omitted in extant employment equity legislation (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+ faculty) but also how to meaningfully grapple with considerations pertaining to caregiving status. If EDI efforts amount to hollow or abstract enactments of inclusivity, and initiatives are performative and lack systemic change processes, we will do little to rectify durable inequalities and fail to fortify the health and well-being of academic parents and their families. Future research is needed on how to effectively encourage the widespread adoption of family-friendly policies in Canada and monitor their progress.

In discussing supports for parents broadly in Canada, Qian and Fuller (2020) argue that “legal prohibitions against family status discrimination may provide some protection to parents, but ambiguities around what constitutes ‘reasonable accommodation’ for caregiving make this by no means assured” (p. S96). Such accommodations remain equivocal in the courts, and therefore also in the realm of employers. In juxtaposition to an individualized accommodation process that demands women (or men or non-binary parents) come forward with their requests and lay bare their personal circumstances to (at times less-than-understanding) employers (Smith-Carrier et al., 2021a), the instigation of flexible policies would provide both greater privacy, equity, and consistency across employee groups, particularly for those most vulnerable to the adverse consequences of family life, economic, and health factors (Qian & Fuller, 2020). The adoption of family-friendly policies would be particularly helpful, not only in times of relative equilibrium but also during di-

sasters or crises when caregiving demands are often heightened.

Some Canadian universities are now re-articulating their EDI commitments. In lockstep with dismantling such programs south of the border, some are suggesting that post-secondary institutions have drifted from their core purpose and have moved “toward a divisive program of redistribution and social change” (Packalen, 2025, para. 1). The recommendations of the *Albertan Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Institution Funding and Alberta’s Competitiveness* (Government of Alberta, 2025), for example, suggest that universities in Alberta must reverse EDI policies in favour of “merit” systems and should commit to freedom of speech and institutional neutrality on political and social issues. Meritocracies, however, as Blanchette (2025) argues, assume a level playing field, and obfuscate the fact that “merit” is context-dependent and socially constructed; it negates the systemic barriers that adversely impact individuals’ advancement and career trajectories and incorrectly assumes that qualifications must be sacrificed for diversity. Indeed, Castilla (2025) has found that organizations espousing meritocratic principles typically reinforce biases, dubbed “the meritocracy paradox.” In this context, universities should seriously reflect on if, and how, they are actively dismantling systemic barriers and promoting greater inclusion. The embrace of a family-friendly orientation would not only improve faculty health and well-being but would also likely improve talent attraction and retention.

CONCLUSION

Diversity in academia is a matter of fairness and essential for producing robust knowledge and scientific discovery. The failure to address systemic barriers for caregiving faculty members disproportionately punishes women, and particularly racialized women and those from working-class backgrounds. The standard academic archetype of an upper middle-class professional man with a stay-at-home partner taking care of domestic life has been steadily eroded over the past half-century, but problematic cultural and

institutional remnants of this model linger. Equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts must recognize the disproportionate and often invisible work engaged by certain groups in academia, parents and mothers specifically, by developing policies and practices that provide them better support and flexibility (Gaudet et al., 2022). Embracing a family-friendly approach is key to promoting an equitable and inclusive academic workplace.

Work and home life in academia do not constitute separate spheres; as such, there is no “magic line between barriers within and barriers beyond the workplace” (Blackett, 2023, p. 234). Effective change requires policies and practices that recognize and account for the fluid imbrication of these domains, as well as the removal of systemic barriers that create or perpetuate a position of relative disadvantage for those holding caregiving responsibilities. Until such time that we see genuine progress on how unpaid care work is recognized and valued in society, academic mothers are likely to continue experiencing greater pressures and demands on their time relative to those without such responsibilities, making them more susceptible to burnout. If we are committed to enhancing the inclusion of people of diverse backgrounds and ideas in all aspects of university life, we must acknowledge that current applications of EDI continue to perpetuate inequities, disproportionately penalizing not only those occupying intersectional identities that are assigned disadvantage, but those engaged in boundless caregiving work.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors used Claude (Anthropic) to draft an initial French translation of the abstract, which was subsequently reviewed by a French-speaking colleague. All output was reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content.

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