

## LETTER

## Reframing motherhood in dementia research: A call for action

Dear Editor,

Science values research performance, academic rank, and citation impact, but women score lower on these items.<sup>1</sup> This is also true for the field of dementia studies, despite female overrepresentation. Andreou et al. showed that while 60% of the researchers in this field were women in 2020, more women than men left it before transitioning into senior positions.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, 64% of the grant schemes for early career researchers were awarded to women, versus only 33% of the grant schemes aimed at senior researchers. Motherhood, in particular, seems to play an important role in the perpetuation of sex imbalances in all research fields; in our experience as dementia researchers, mothers may confront “invisible” challenges while pursuing research careers. Below, we offer three examples of such challenges: lack of support for infant feeding practices, lack of recognition of care work, and harmful policies. We conclude with an urgent call for action on the academic work floor.

In academia, new mothers are often expected to seamlessly transition back to full-time workloads after a short maternity leave, which leaves little room for adjusting to the profound changes they confront. Consider infant feeding. Policies and laws stipulate that time spent on pumping breastmilk during office hours should be compensated, but pumping at the workplace can be complicated. Pumping sessions must be squeezed in between meetings (which hampers milk production). Moreover, there are often no suitable pumping rooms. Furthermore, pumping may cost up to two daily working hours, but academic mothers' real workload is not adjusted to this significant time loss. These issues may impact mothers' sense of belonging, self-worth, and professional appreciation in relation to their research group.

A second example lies with balancing care work at home. Female researchers are still more involved in household and caretaking responsibilities than male researchers.<sup>3</sup> Many mothers also pay a double “baby penalty”: not only do they serve as the primary caregivers, but they also do not have a partner who helps carry the load—which male researchers do.<sup>3</sup> In addition, family responsibilities often one-sidedly impede academic mothers' participation in conferences and networking events, which are crucial for career advancement. Roshell relates this to the double standards mothers face: they are expected to approach work as though they do not have children, but also to parent as if they do not have careers.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, institutional policies designed to overcome the sex gap in academia may—ironically—harm mothers. Thus, researchers who are fathers profit from parenthood-related extensions for grant application schemes, while not being subjected to the double workload mothers face.<sup>5</sup>

These three examples raise poignant questions about whether universities are indeed as mother-friendly as they promise to be. The lack of support women experience plays an important role in obstructing their success, which also affects women in dementia studies. Interestingly, dementia research focuses on women as caregivers for persons living with dementia, but neglects to care for its women researchers—especially mothers.

We believe, however, that motherhood should be celebrated as a source of strength and resilience, because researchers who are mothers develop unique skills and talents (e.g., empathy, time management). We therefore call on our colleagues in dementia studies to counteract harmful systematic biases, daily practices, and policies affecting mothers. Supervisors and teams could do much to acknowledge and accommodate mothers' invisible labor. Concrete improvements may include: supportive and open conversations on motherhood, flexible office hours, remote work options, child-care facilities, and mentoring tailored to mothers. In addition, truly fair grant schemes are warranted. But most importantly: motherhood should be reframed in our academic cultures, by viewing it not as a private burden but as a public gain.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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