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Gender Equality Plan at the University of Ljubljana: The Case of Work–Life Balance

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Abstract

The article addresses the challenges to achieving gender equality in academia, with a particular focus on work–life balance as outlined in the University of Ljubljana's Gender Equality Plan (2022–2027). Based on a 2022 survey of 820 academic staff members, the study investigates how caregiving responsibilities, institutional practices, and organizational culture affect career advancement and satisfaction with the work environment, particularly concerning gender equality. The findings reveal significant gender differences in caregiving responsibilities, uptake of parental leave, access to leadership positions, and perceptions of institutional support. Women are disproportionately affected by inflexible promotion criteria, such as the mandatory three-month stay at a foreign university or research institution, and report higher instances of career setbacks following parental leave. Regression analyses underscore the role of perceived equal opportunities, supportive leadership, and workplace culture in shaping experiences of gender equality. While the Gender Equality Plan at the University of Ljubljana outlines promising measures, the study highlights a critical gap between policy and practice.

Keywords

academia; career advancement; caregiving; gender equality; institutional practices; work in research; work–life balance

1. Introduction

The issue of gender equality in Slovenian academia has a similar history to that of many universities around the world. Women still face gender stereotypes that prevent them from achieving scientific results like their male colleagues. Universities continue to be gendered organizations where cultural beliefs about the gender differences are built into the very structure of the workplace. Research shows that women in academia face inequalities in the fields of earning, tenure, promotion, and access to resources (Gatta & Roos, 2004). But it is also important to recognize the progress made in recent years. Women have more opportunities to reach higher academic positions, even though the gender gap in higher academic positions persists (see Table 1).

One of the larger areas of gender inequality in science is work–life balance, as it is traditionally associated with entrenched beliefs about what science is and who can do it. There is still a belief that science requires total commitment, and that the ideal scientist has no private life and is not burdened by external demands (Rosa, 2021). Added to this in the present are the characteristics of a flexible, adaptable, multitasking scientist who can manage, raise money, compete in the research market, deal with rapidly changing technologies, do all kinds of work including administrative, travel internationally, stay abroad longer and have a strong impact, i.e., be well recognized in the scientific community to raise the international ranks of the home university. To meet these expectations, scientists must have skills for self-governance, self-optimization, self-marketisation, and be self-sufficient (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017). Such expectations are increasingly common in academic recruitment, selection, evaluation, and promotion processes (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). The old-fashioned notion of dedication to science has thus taken on whole new dimensions in the age of neoliberal academia. The public image of the scientist and the demands on their performance have implications for work–life balance for all, especially for those who have children, and this is an area explicitly addressed in Horizon Europe's guidelines for Gender Equality Plans (GEPs; see REA, 2023).

Efforts to reduce gender inequality in science date back to the beginning of the new millennium when the European Commission recognized the need for more determined actions to ensure gender equality in research. The main institutional practices that perpetuate gender discrimination in science and innovation are the lack of transparency in decision-making, errors in the evaluation of merit suitable for a leadership position, unconscious bias in the evaluation of excellence, especially in the process of peer review, gender inequality, which leads to missed opportunities and cognitive errors in knowledge and technology, as well as the persistence of a gender pay gap (European Commission, 2012). Since then, numerous groups and bodies have produced reports and recommendations for concrete measures that should be employed at the EU and the national levels. The result was that already in 2013, 36% of research-performing organizations had introduced GEPs (Rosa et al., 2021, p. 3). None of the Slovenian universities or research institutions were among them.

The main push factor for Slovenian institutions was the fact that, in 2022, the GEP became an eligibility criterion to participate in Horizon Europe. While it may seem like an obligation without real commitment, it was also a key opportunity to plan necessary changes. At the University of Ljubljana (hereafter: UL), a strategic document on gender equality had been proposed but was not accepted by the university management. When UL finally formed the Working Group for the Preparation of the GEP at the UL (hereafter WG GEP UL), it was made up of representatives from the UL member faculties from the social sciences and humanities, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, and the arts

academies. The members were researchers who had been active in the field of gender equality. The briefly summarized phases of GEP development consisted of gathering background information and knowledge about the GEP process: analysis of EC documents; a review of GEPs at universities in the EU countries, especially GUILD and LEAR members; and interviews with Slovenian institutions that have already adopted GEPs. After this phase, the WG GEP UL reviewed existing data. The UL collects gender-disaggregated data on staff and students, which was important for the creation of a GEP at the university level. In addition, in 2022, the UL (through the University Office for Quality, Analysis, and Reporting) carried out a survey on gender equality among employees and students. The collected data showed that one of the areas that may be a cause of the gender gap (see Table 1) is work–life balance, where women have much more difficulty than men in coping with responsibilities in both areas (University of Ljubljana, 2022a), which is consistent with a 2011 study on gender differences in science in Slovenia (Ule et al., 2016) showing that balancing work and family poses a significant obstacle for women in their careers.

The University of Ljubljana's Gender Equality Plan (hereafter: GEP UL) was adopted by the Senate of the UL in April 2022. In addition, a new working group to monitor its implementation was established in April 2023. The GEP UL is the first document ever to specifically address gender inequalities at UL. In 2024, the UL also established a Working Group for the Preparation of the Guidelines for Gender Equality in the Field of Work–Life Balance at UL.

There are two conceptually distinct terms used to describe the relationship between the work and private spheres: "work–life balance" and "work–family balance," with the former increasingly present in the literature and policy documents. Joseph and Sebastian (2019) state that the former concept is broader and refers to the relationship between work and non-work domains (including family, personal life, self-care, friends, society, religion, etc.), the later refers to the relationship between work and family, which mostly includes caregiving responsibilities and housework. Rosa (2024) highlights the differences in national contexts that affect the distinct interpretations of work–life balance, but essentially, it is about how work–life balance can be managed and articulated. In this article, the term "work–life balance" is used for two reasons: first, because the measures of the GEP UL do not pertain exclusively to parents; and second, to better align with the research results presented in the empirical part of the article. Even though most work–life balance problems are experienced by parents, there are also other groups of employees who face obstacles.

The article is based on data from a 2022 survey on gender equality conducted at the UL, using a sample of 820 academic staff members. It focuses on how caregiving responsibilities, along with related institutional practices and organizational culture, impact career advancement and satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality. In the first step, we examined gender differences concerning work–life balance and caregiving responsibilities, satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality and career advancement, and availability of leadership positions and barriers to advancement. In the second step, we conducted two multiple linear regression analyses to examine the factors influencing satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality and the perceptions of gender equality in career advancement.

The article is divided into the following main sections. First, the conceptual framework of work–life balance in academia is presented, followed by the related emphases from the GEP UL. Then we present the main research findings and data on work–life balance at the UL. The final part provides some reflections on findings and recommendations for future actions in the context of GEP UL.

2. Conceptualizing Work–Life Balance in Academia

Science was and to a certain extent still is understood as an area outside of everyday life (including caregiving responsibilities), an area of exploration and experimentation in which scientists arrive at scientifically valid findings and provide society with new knowledge and insights. To achieve this, one must be dedicated to science, committed to it, and able to detach oneself from the constraints, expectations, and routines of everyday life. Gatta and Roos (2004) note that the public-private dichotomy is based on the belief that privacy in the scientific sphere is a disruption to the system and an indicator of bad science, as good science requires full engagement. The private and scientific spheres are therefore not complementary but competing spheres. This dichotomous separation is highly gendered as public belongs to men and private to women. One of the main problems arising from this is that greater opportunities for independent and autonomous scientific activity are only available at the higher levels of the scientific hierarchy (Bailyn, 2003), which is male-dominated. This is known as vertical segregation (or leaky pipe phenomenon), and data shows that in most of the EU countries, women are in less favorable positions than men (Macarie & Moldovan, 2015). Higher academic positions also offer stable employment and financial security. This perpetuates a hierarchical system and ensures that these positions are predominantly held by men, who have more time to accumulate merits at the top of the hierarchy due to their reduced family commitments. The gap between the lower and upper ranks is therefore always greater when quantified performance and previous achievements are the criterion (Gvozdanović & Bailey, 2021). This is also relevant for the UL. Table 1 shows the ratio between men and women in lower and upper academic positions.

Table 1. The number of employees by gender, salary groups, and years 2013 and 2023 at UL.

Salary group	Academic title	Gender	2013	%	2023	%
D1—higher education teachers and associate higher education staff	Teaching assistant with doctoral degree	M	469	56.8	425	53.1
		F	356	43.2	375	46.9
	Assistant Professor	M	238	57.3	240	54.8
		F	177	42.7	198	45.2
	Associate professor	M	285	64.8	266	61.4
		F	155	35.2	167	38.6
	Professor	M	443	75.6	543	64.3
		F	143	24.4	294	35.7
H1—Researchers	Researchers	M	584	57.3	808	53.0
		F	436	42.7	716	47.0
J—Professional, administrative, and technical staff		M	607	31.7	600	28.0
		F	1308	68.3	1546	72.0

Source: University of Ljubljana (2023).

Apart from the existence of structural barriers, the presented gender gap can be partly explained by the fact that many women consider themselves not good enough if they are hampered by personal commitments, and in case they have children, they no longer have ambitions to reach better positions in the scientific hierarchy. This self-selection is problematic as it individualizes structural causes of inequalities (Nielsen, 2021). Women also accept this position because they need support in balancing work and family life, especially childcare (Baker, 2008). The research of Russo (2024) shows that the decision about parenthood

for women in academia is complex and complicated, especially for early-career female researchers. Studies show that many women academics decide not to have children as they are aware that this would minimize their chances for an academic career (Wilton & Ross, 2017; Zipora Reuter, 2019). Others postpone motherhood, as once they have children, they struggle to balance work and childcare, with many continuing to work even during maternity leave—a problem observed at UL as well, as shown in the research results. They would rather talk about the work–family conflict than balance. The research on fatherhood in academia discloses that men also experience hardship when they decide to take paternity leave or share caregiving responsibilities with a partner. Men who share parental responsibilities equally report obstacles in reconciling work and family life. Gould and Lovato (2019) report that men rarely ask for support from their academic employer as they do not want to be recognized as seeking help. They do not want to be seen by their departments as less committed to academia or less independent because they have children. Fathers also report that they experience all kinds of judgments about their masculinity and prejudices related to doing "women's work," which also affects their academic careers. They are seen as less dominant and not worthy of promotion (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). The result is that much less attention is paid to fathers when it comes to measures to improve work–life balance. This problem is particularly challenging for gay men, where the discrimination is multiple (due to care role and sexual orientation) and often overlooked (Marotte et al., 2011).

The problem of reconciling work and private life is becoming more pressing for everyone, as universities have undergone a significant transformation: from an autonomous scientific institution to a neoliberalized institution with a governance model that combines the rhetoric of the free market with organizational practices of new public management, adapting scientific spaces to the management models of private companies to focus on work-centered organizational cultures and increase competition and production (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Lorenz, 2012). The profound organizational changes that accompany the introduction of the new public management model in universities lead to increasingly stressful work determined by the standards of academic excellence, which is gendered because its consequences are different for men and women (Rosa, 2021). This also changes the image of the scientist, because under these conditions, those who produce a lot are more successful than those who do not, but conduct research thoroughly. The restriction of academic freedom and autonomy and the increasing control and demand for submission to the prescribed sets of organizational rules (Hadley, 2015; e.g., keeping track of work attendance, consistent reporting of performance within the working day, administration and bureaucracy workload, etc.) also affect work–life balance. Drew and Marshall (2021) state that these demands have a particular effect on academic and research staff who have caregiving responsibilities, among whom the majority are women.

Brough et al. (2021) even report on work–life backlash. Women and men do not want to adopt work–life balance policies because of the informal disapproving organizational culture and internalized guilt of enlarging the workload of colleagues who hardly manage their own work. Harassment and discrimination are present to a much greater extent than universities would be willing to admit. The abusive and power-related practices are often hidden in a changed structural environment, caused by the new public management, which promotes hierarchical relations and an individualistic, competitive work culture. Organizational culture has a major impact on professionalism, inclusion, well-being, and job satisfaction (Stefanovska–Petkovska et al., 2019).

Job satisfaction and a democratic, inclusive management attitude increase employee security and creativity, which in science is essential for innovation in scientific explorations. However, an Australian study on the careers of young researchers shows that they are confronted with increased demands, such as time pressure and long working hours: "Intensification of work time has been matched by the extensification of work into non-workplace spaces" (Cannizzo et al., 2019, p. 252). Griffin (2022) described this situation with the concept of work-work balance, which is about balancing different work demands. For researchers at UL, this means working half their time as teachers and half as researchers (50:50 split), participating in many projects with a small number of hours allocated to each, and taking on administrative tasks in addition to research, which is particularly problematic for women. Other studies also come to this conclusion, showing that there are considerable inequalities in the allocation of academic tasks, which are based on a systematic gender bias as women are burdened with more administrative work than their male counterparts (O'Meara et al., 2017).

Rosa (2021) points out that these demands lead to an extension of working hours to evenings and weekends and beyond the eight-hour working day. In addition, the number of workers on precarious temporary contracts, i.e., fixed-term contracts (usually for the duration of project funding or shorter) or part-time contracts, is increasing, further increasing dependence on employers and at the same time leading to subordination, as people risk losing their jobs if they speak up too loudly for their rights or point out irregularities. At the same time, the boundaries between work and private life are blurring as digital technology means the demands of being constantly connected to work are very high (Johnston et al., 2022).

Change is not only taking place in the workplace, but also in the private sphere. The idea of a fulfilling life refers to all the activities in a person's life around which they develop interests (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). Children are increasingly becoming the focus of men's lives, not just women's. Research shows that fatherhood goes hand in hand with the care of the child, so men are taking on more caregiving responsibilities than in the past (Wilton & Ross, 2017), the phenomenon known as active or involved fatherhood, which is increasingly present in Slovenia as well (Rener et al., 2008; Stropnik et al., 2019; Švab & Humer, 2013). However, a significant gender gap persists in the distribution of housework (EIGE, 2024), and Slovenia is no exception. While men are becoming more involved in family work, a predominant pattern of so-called supportive fatherhood emerges, where men primarily assist women, who are responsible for most of the family work (Rener et al., 2008; Švab & Humer, 2013). In addition, there are often dual academic careers where work–life balance is a particular challenge due to flexible working hours, especially in teaching, which is usually a full-time job (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Wilton & Ross, 2017). Nevertheless, concerns about work–life balance increasingly affect all genders and different groups of employees (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

This is relevant to our study because the work–life balance measures in GEP UL aim to enable women and men who take on caregiving responsibilities to advance to higher academic titles or leadership positions, which is primarily associated with quantifiable performance measures. For UL, this means achieving a certain number of publications in journals with a high impact factor, leading (international and national) research projects, and particularly uninterrupted three-month research or teaching at a foreign university or research institution. The appointment to academic titles in Slovenia is called the habilitation procedure, which is strictly regulated (University of Ljubljana, 2022c).

In the introduction, we briefly outlined the steps that UL took in developing the GEP UL. In what follows, we will outline how GEP UL addresses the issue of work–life balance and then present the results of the research that underpins these measures.

3. The GEP UL (2022–2027)

The GEP UL was adopted in 2022, which systematically addresses the area of gender equality and inequality at the UL. It is stated that:

> The University's Gender Equality Plan aims to provide conditions for a working and learning environment that is sensitive to gender and other discrimination or bias, such as unjustified distinctions based on physical disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, social status or other characteristics that may result in employees and students being treated less favorably and therefore having less opportunity to succeed and participate in all processes at university and member faculty level. (University of Ljubljana, 2022b, p. 2)

The document includes the following six areas: (a) a culture of gender equality; (b) data; (c) balancing private (family) and work life; (d) gender balance in decision-making and leadership bodies; (e) gender equality in employment and career development; (f) measures against violence in academic spaces, including harassment, sexual harassment, and bullying. Each field consists of objectives and concrete measures, with the responsible actors identified for each measure (university, faculties, employees, students, etc.; see University of Ljubljana, 2022b).

Regarding the work–life balance, GEP UL recognizes that:

> Reconciling work and family commitments is an essential element of a good quality of work and life. At the same time, it is an area that constitutes one of the major obstacles to women's careers, as they often take on a large part of caregiving responsibilities in their private life, both concerning their children and other family members. Taking on these responsibilities can hinder women and men alike in meeting the conditions for progression in studies and employment, as well as in engaging in research and obtaining projects. (University of Ljubljana, 2022b, p. 10)

This section of the GEP UL includes the following objectives:

1. To make it easier to balance work commitments with parenthood and/or caring responsibilities for other family members.
2. Consistent compliance with, and awareness of, the legal possibilities for reconciling family and work commitments.
3. Uninterrupted integration into teaching, research, and professional work after returning from parental leave, caring for another family member, or extended absence due to illness.

The issue of work–life balance is also closely related to three other areas of GEP UL, particularly gender equality in employment and career development. Women may face challenges in these areas due to an unequal burden of household responsibilities, especially childcare. This imbalance stems from structurally

rooted gender inequalities, resulting in a gender-asymmetric division of domestic work. Women in academia may particularly face challenges in meeting the requirement of at least three months of work at a university abroad to achieve the title of associate (and later full) professor, especially if they have caregiving responsibilities for dependent children and other relatives. GEP UL strives to address this problem by aiming for more flexible implementation of promotion conditions, a balanced distribution of research resources (especially for visiting academic institutions abroad), and the prevention of overload and burnout (University of Ljubljana, 2022b).

4. Survey on Gender Equality at the UL: Methodology and Sample Characteristics

As previously mentioned, in 2022 the UL conducted a survey on gender equality among employees and students. The questionnaire was developed by the WG GEP UL. In this article, we present data from a sample of academic staff (teaching and research staff), focusing on issues related to work–life balance.

The online survey was carried out from January 13, 2022, to February 10, 2022, among employees and students at the UL with two corresponding separate questionnaires. The final sample of all employees consisted of 1,502 respondents, while the sample of academic staff included in this analysis consisted of 820 respondents. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, relevant for further analysis in this article, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

	Gender	
	Male	**Female**
	% (N)	**% (N)**
Gender	43.5 (357)	56.5 (463)
Age		
Up to 30	27.2 (97)	25.1 (116)
31–45	36.4 (130)	31.1 (144)
46–60	31.4 (112)	35.2 (163)
61–75	5.0 (18)	8.6 (40)
Workplace		
Teaching	58.3 (208)	58.5 (271)
Research	30.3 (108)	31.7 (147)
Combination of teaching & research	11.5 (41)	9.7 (45)
Faculty by academic field		
Social sciences, humanities, and art academies	27.1 (92)	46.8 (205)
Natural sciences and engineering	72.9 (247)	53.2 (233)
Intimate partnership		
Married	48.0 (108)	40.3 (141)
Cohabitation	20.0 (45)	23.7 (83)
Registered partnership*	4.4 (10)	2.9 (10)
Non-registered partnership*	7.6 (17)	9.4 (33)
Single	13.3 (30)	11.6 (40)
Divorced	0.9 (2)	6.0 (21)
Widow/widower	0.0 (0)	0.6 (2)

Table 2. (Cont.) Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

	Gender	
	Male	Female
	% (N)	% (N)
Children		
Yes	56.9 (128)	57.6 (201)
No	43.1 (97)	42.4 (148)
Number of children		
One	19.2 (24)	30.3 (56)
Two	53.6 (67)	56.2 (104)
Three	22.4 (28)	12.4 (23)
Four +	4.8 (6)	1.1 (2)
Dependent children		
One	30.6 (33)	34.4 (52)
Two	46.3 (50)	55.0 (83)
Three	18.5 (20)	9.3 (14)
Four +	4.6 (5)	1.3 (2)

Notes: * The terms used for same-sex couples' status in the survey followed the legislation in force at the time; full legal equality of same-sex couples came into effect on January 31, 2023.

The statistical analysis was done in two steps. First, we looked at gender differences for the selected questions regarding work–family balance, and questions related to satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality, accessibility of leadership positions, and career advancement. In the second step, we conducted two multiple linear regression analyses to explore the factors influencing satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality and the perceptions of gender equality in career advancement.

5. Results

5.1. Gender Differences

5.1.1. Work–Life Balance, Caregiving Responsibilities, and Exercising Parental Rights

Among those respondents who have caregiving responsibilities ($N = 235$), the majority care for children (65.1%), followed by those who care for elderly parents or other relatives (16.1%); those, who care for their partners (9.4%); those who care for children with special needs (4.3%), and those who care for other persons in need (2.1%).

Respondents reported the estimated share of caregiving responsibilities they take on. While 31.9% ($N = 145$) of women and 35.7% ($N = 122$) of men did not take on these responsibilities, approximately one-third (33.8%; $N = 154$) of women reported taking on more than half of these responsibilities in comparison with 6.1% ($N = 21$) of men. On the other hand, only 9.0% ($N = 41$) of women and 18.1% ($N = 42$) of men reported taking on less than half of these responsibilities (Chi-square = 96,480; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

The questionnaire also included questions about exercising the caregiving rights in the last ten years, i.e., parental leave and part-time work due to parenthood. In the past ten years, 10.8% ($N = 49$) of women and

6.5% (N = 22) of men have taken parental leave (Chi-square = 4,397; df = 1; $Sig.$ = 0.036). Part-time work due to parenting responsibilities was predominantly utilized by women (4.9% [N = 22] of women and 0.3% [N = 1] of men; Chi-square = 14,261; df = 1; $Sig.$ = 0.000).

Those who took parental leave in the last ten years were also asked about career setbacks related to this leave. Among women, 23.9% (N = 58) believed that they always or often experienced career setbacks due to taking parental leave, while 60.7% (N = 147) reported that they rarely or never faced setbacks. Among men, 3.3% (N = 5) stated that they always or often experienced career setbacks due to parental leave, while 92.1% believed that they rarely or never experienced setbacks (Chi-square = 62,012; df = 4; $Sig.$ = 0.000).

Regarding the work–life balance, respondents were also asked if the management expects parents to return early from parental leave. There are 80.9% (N = 195) of women and 90.3% (N = 150) of men who believe this is never or rarely the case (Chi-square = 16,554; df = 4; $Sig.$ = 0.002).

Another important issue is whether the management, when planning work, adjusts workloads to caregiving responsibilities. Among respondents, 46.7% (N = 122) of women and 29.4% (N = 47) of men think this never happens or rarely happens, while 35.2% (N = 92) of women and 50.6% (N = 81) of men believe this happens often or always (Chi-square = 18,857, df = 4; $Sig.$ = 0.001).

While half of the respondents are not aware if the organization provides support to parents returning from parental leave to facilitate their reintegration into the team and work, there are 74.2% (N = 152) of women who think this never happens or rarely happens, compared to 56.7% (N = 68) of men who think this never happens (Chi-square = 11,200; df = 4; $Sig.$ = 0.024).

5.1.2. Satisfaction With the Work Environment in Terms of Gender Equality and Career Advancement

The questionnaire included a question about satisfaction with the work environment as far as gender equality is concerned. Among women, 58.1% (N = 222) reported they were very satisfied or satisfied with the work environment in terms of gender equality, in comparison with a higher percentage of men (73.6%; N = 184), who shared this view. On the other hand, 21.2% (N = 81) of women and 8.0% (N = 20) of men were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Chi-square = 40,948; df = 5; $Sig.$ = 0.000).

Respondents were also asked about their opinion regarding the statement that women have equal opportunities and do not need special support in this respect. Among men, 55.2% (N = 133) agreed or completely agreed with the statement in comparison with 30.5% (N = 114) of women, while 27.8% (N = 67) of men, in comparison with 47.3% (N = 177) of women, disagree or completely disagree with the statement (Chi-square = 46,826; df = 4; $Sig.$ = 0.000).

Significant gender differences were also found in the statement that women can advance in their careers within their organization as quickly as men. Only 41.4% (N = 154) of women agree or completely agree with the statement in comparison with 77.2% (N = 186) of men. On the other hand, 31.6% (N = 118) of women and only 9.6% (N = 23) of men disagree or completely disagree (Chi-square = 89,987; df = 4; $Sig.$ = 0.000).

The pattern of gendered division of labor at work as an indicator of gender equality can be traced through the question regarding administrative tasks, more precisely, an assessment about being burdened with these tasks. Men were more likely to strongly agree or agree with the statement that women in their organization are not more burdened with administrative tasks than men (73.0%; $N = 176$), while women were significantly less likely to agree with this statement (39.0%). On the other hand, 32.8% ($N = 123$) of women and only 8.3% ($N = 20$) of men disagree or strongly disagree with it (Chi-square = 90,124; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

Respondents were also asked about whether they felt neglected or hindered at work due to their gender. Among women, 34.2% ($N = 129$) felt that way in comparison with 6.7% ($N = 16$) of men (Chi-square = 62,671; $df = 1$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

5.1.3. Availability of Leadership Positions and Barriers to Advancement

Respondents were asked questions about leadership positions and career advancement, e.g., whether they received an invitation and consequently accepted a leadership position. While most respondents never received such an invitation, a higher percentage of women, 66.6% ($N = 243$), than men, 59.8% ($N = 140$), selected this answer. There are also slight gender differences (22.2% [$N = 81$] of women and 29.5% [$N = 69$] of men) among those who have already received an invitation to apply for a leadership position and accepted it. About the same share of women (11.2%; $N = 41$) and men (10.7%; $N = 25$) either received or rejected it. Gender differences are not statistically significant here (Chi-square = 4,084; $df = 2$; $Sig. = 0.130$).

Respondents were also asked whether they ever wanted to apply for a leadership position. Most men and women never applied (78.9% ($N = 288$) of women and 73.1% ($N = 171$) of men), while there were 16.7% ($N = 61$) of women who had this wish and applied in comparison with 24.4% ($N = 57$) of men, who have already wanted to apply for a leadership position and have done so (Chi-square = 6,149; $df = 2$; $Sig. = 0.046$).

Academic staff were asked about their experiences regarding the mandatory 3-month stay abroad required for habilitation advancement. At UL, it is mandatory to complete at least a three-month stay abroad for the purposes of habilitation for the title of associate professor. Those who could not go abroad were asked whether it was due to family obligations. Among women, 46.8% ($N = 52$) stated that the reason they did not complete a three-month stay abroad for the purpose of habilitation was related to family obligations in comparison with 28.6% of men ($N = 20$; Chi-square = 5,985; $df = 1$; $Sig. = 0.014$).

Respondents were also asked to answer whether their superiors, using various measures, enable them to be successful in their careers despite parenthood. While 42.3% ($N = 80$) of women and 30.8% ($N = 37$) of men believed this never happened or happens rarely, for 27.5% ($N = 52$) of women and 26.7% ($N = 32$) of men this happens occasionally, and for 30.2% ($N = 57$) of women and 42.5% ($N = 51$) of men this happens often or always (Chi-square = 15,499; $df = 4$; $Sig = 0.004$).

Additionally, respondents were asked whether their family, work, and caregiving responsibilities are perceived at work as an obstacle to meeting the conditions for advancement. Among those who answered that this is never or rarely the case, there are 70.7% ($N = 181$) of women in comparison with 87.8% ($N = 137$) of men, and among those who answered that this is often or always the case, there were 15.6% ($N = 40$) of women in comparison with 5.8% ($N = 9$) of men (Chi-square = 16,622; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.002$).

5.2. Regression Models

As data show, despite formal equality policies in higher education institutions, women remain underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions. Further, data show that women encounter more difficulties in terms of work–life balance, are less satisfied with the work environment, and face higher barriers to career advancement. To more closely examine the factors influencing satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality and the perceptions of gender equality in career advancement, we have conducted two multiple linear regression analyses. In both regressions, we included independent variables measuring five sets of factors: socio-demographic factors, family factors, organizational culture factors, perceived equal opportunities at the workplace factors, and experience of humiliation and harassment at the workplace factors.

5.2.1. Regression 1: Satisfaction With the Work Environment in Terms of Gender Equality

A detailed description of dependent and independent variables for regression 1 is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Dependent and independent variables.

Dependent	Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality	How satisfied are you in general with your work environment (work conditions and atmosphere) in terms of gender equality?
Independent	Socio-demographic factors	Age
		Gender
		Academic field (Natural sciences and engineering or Social sciences and humanities)
	Family	Caregiving responsibilities (How many caregiving responsibilities do you have for children and others?)
		Parenthood (Do you have children?)
	Organizational culture	Communication culture (Leadership ensures an appropriate culture of communication)
		Neglect of one's potential by leadership (I believe I have the abilities and potential that leadership is aware of but deliberately overlooks)
	Perceived Equal opportunities (EO) at the workplace	Equal opportunities of women, no encouragement needed (Women have the same opportunities as men and do not need special encouragement)
		Equal opportunities of women to progress (In our organization, women can progress as quickly as men)
		Equal leadership opportunities, regardless of gender and sexual orientation (In our organization, there are equal opportunities for all to apply for leadership positions, regardless of gender or sexual orientation)
	Experience of humiliation and harassment at the workplace	Ridicule and humiliation (I experience ridicule and humiliation from my supervisor and/or colleagues, which hinders my career path
		Bullying, harassment, violence (Have you ever experienced bullying, (sexual) harassment, or (sexual) violence on UL premises?)

The model is statistically significant (see Table 4), $F_{(12, 407)} = 41.076$, $p < .001$, and explains approximately 55% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.548$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.534$). Variance inflation factors (VIF) ranged from 1.1 to 2.6, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues.

Table 4. Model summary and Anova.

Model summary				
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.740	0.548	0.534	0.75147
ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	278.353	12	23.196	41.076
Residual	229.837	407	0.565	
Total	508.190	419		

Regression analysis revealed seven statistically significant predictors (see Table 5), among which three have positive effects and four have negative effects. The most influential positive predictor is communication culture by leadership, followed by the perceived equal opportunities of women to progress as quickly as men, and the perceived view that women need no additional encouragement as they have equal opportunities. The most influential negative predictor is experienced ridicule and humiliation, followed by perception of neglect of one's potential, parenthood, and finally, experience of bullying, harassment, and violence.

Table 5. Predictors.

	Unstand. Coeff.		Standar. Coeff.			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.474	0.284		8.701	0		
Age	0.099	0.055	0.076	1.807	0.072	0.622	1.607
Gender	−0.07	0.086	−0.031	−0.808	0.419	0.777	1.287
Academic field	−0.143	0.079	−0.064	−1.813	0.071	0.899	1.112
Caring responsibilities	0.045	0.044	0.049	1.04	0.299	0.509	1.966
Parenthood	−0.257	0.12	−0.113	−2.13	0.034	0.392	2.553
Communication culture	0.204	0.038	0.231	5.349	0.000	0.594	1.684
Neglect of one's potential by leadership	−0.142	0.039	−0.158	−3.61	0.000	0.578	1.731
Equal opportunities of women, no encouragement needed	0.117	0.04	0.142	2.915	0.004	0.467	2.143
Equal opportunities of women to progress	0.198	0.047	0.224	4.178	0.000	0.386	2.592

Table 5. (Cont.) Predictors.

	Unstand. Coeff.		Standar. Coeff.			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation	0.023	0.038	0.024	0.608	0.544	0.731	1.368
Ridicule and humiliation	−0.235	0.054	−0.182	−4.401	0.000	0.652	1.535
Bullying, harassment, violence	−0.193	0.092	−0.081	−2.097	0.037	0.737	1.357

None of the predictors in the socio-demographic set of factors are statistically significant, although age and academic field are marginally significant, while gender is highly insignificant. In the family set of factors, caring responsibilities are not significant, while parenthood is, with negative effects on satisfaction with the work environment. In the set of organizational culture predictors, both are statistically significant, with strong positive and negative effects, respectively. In the set of equal opportunities predictors, all are significant, except for the perception of equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. In the set of experiences of humiliation and harassment at work, both predictors are significant and have negative effects on satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality.

5.2.2. Regression 2: Gender Equality in Career Advancement

A detailed description of dependent and independent variables for regression 2 is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Dependent and independent variables.

Dependent	Gender equality in career advancement	In our organization, women can progress as quickly as men.
Independent	Socio-demographic factors	Age
		Gender
		Academic field (Natural sciences and engineering or social sciences and humanities)
	Family	Caregiving responsibilities (How many caregiving responsibilities do you have for children and others?)
		Parenthood (Do you have children?)
	Organizational culture	Neglect of one's potential by leadership (I believe I have the abilities and potential that leadership is aware of, but deliberately overlooks)
		Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality (How satisfied are you in general with your work environment (work conditions and atmosphere) in terms of gender equality?)
	Perceived equal opportunities in the workplace	Equal opportunities for women, no encouragement needed (Women have the same opportunities as men and do not need special encouragement)

Table 6. (Cont.) Dependent and independent variables.

Independent	Perceived equal opportunities in the workplace	Women have every opportunity to attain leadership positions (In our organization, women have every opportunity to reach the highest leadership positions)
		Equal leadership opportunities, regardless of gender and sexual orientation (In our organization, there are equal opportunities for all to apply for leadership positions, regardless of gender or sexual orientation)
	Experience of humiliation and harassment at the workplace	Ridicule and humiliation (I experience ridicule and humiliation from my supervisor and/or colleagues, which hinders my career path)
		Bullying, harassment, violence (Have you ever experienced bullying, (sexual) harassment, or (sexual) violence on UL premises?

The model is statistically significant (see Table 7), $F_{(12, 417)} = 81.965$, $p < .001$, and has a very high correlation between prediction and actual values of the dependent variable ($R = 0.838$). The model explains approximately 70% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.702$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.694$), indicating a very strong explanatory power of the model. VIF ranges from 1.07 to 2.62, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues.

Table 7. Model summary and Anova.

Model summary				
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.838	0.702	0.694	0.690
ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	468.690	12	39.058	81.965
Residual	198.707	417	0.477	
Total	667.398	429		

Regression analysis revealed five statistically significant predictors (see Table 8), among which four have positive effects and one has negative effects. The most influential and very strong positive predictor is the belief that women have every opportunity to attain leadership positions, closely followed by the belief that women have equal opportunities and therefore need no additional encouragement. Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender is a moderate predictor, followed by parenthood. Gender is the single significant negative predictor of the perception of gender equality in career advancement.

In the socio-demographic set of factors, gender is a statistically significant negative predictor, while age and academic field are not relevant predictors. In the family set of factors, caring responsibilities are not significant, while parenthood is, with positive effects on gender equality in career advancement. In the set of organizational culture predictors, satisfaction with the work environment regarding gender equality is a significant positive predictor, while the perception of neglect of one's potential is not significant, though it approaches significance. In the set of equal opportunities factors, the two predictors measuring perceptions of the opportunities of women are strong positive predictors, while the perception of equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, is not significant. In the set of experiences of

humiliation and harassment at work, none are significant, indicating they do not influence the perception of gender equality in career advancement.

Table 8. Predictors.

	Unstand. Coeff.		Standar. Coeff.			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.474	0.284		8.701	0		
Age	−0.053	0.050	−0.036	−1.048	0.295	0.604	1.655
Gender	−0.260	0.077	−0.101	−3.392	0.001	0.805	1.242
Academic field	0.040	0.070	0.016	0.571	0.568	0.933	1.072
Caregiving responsibilities	0.014	0.040	0.014	0.361	0.718	0.497	2.010
Parenthood	0.251	0.110	0.098	2.275	0.023	0.382	2.616
Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality	0.152	0.043	0.135	3.551	0.000	0.497	2.010
Neglect of one's potential by leadership	−0.060	0.034	−0.059	−1.744	0.082	0.623	1.604
Equal opportunities of women, no encouragement needed	0.323	0.033	0.349	9.700	0.000	0.553	1.809
Women have every opportunity to attain a leadership position	0.416	0.040	0.392	10.353	0.000	0.499	2.004
Equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation	0.041	0.035	0.038	1.177	0.240	0.699	1.431
Ridicule and humiliation	0.028	0.050	0.019	0.563	0.573	0.620	1.614
Bullying, harassment, violence	−0.065	0.083	−0.024	−0.783	0.434	0.755	1.324

6. Discussion

This data confirms that work–life balance is a central barrier to gender equality in academia. Women disproportionately take on caregiving responsibilities, which negatively affect their careers. Statistically significant differences in the use of parental leave and part-time work due to caregiving responsibilities highlight persistent structural inequalities. Women also report more barriers to promotion and less access to leadership roles, suggesting that academic structures still align with traditional male career paths, especially at higher hierarchical levels (Galligan et al., 2021; Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

One critical institutional barrier is the habilitation requirement for a mandatory three-month stay abroad. For many women, family commitments prevent meeting this condition, thereby limiting career advancement.

These findings, consistent with other research (Gvozdanović & Bailey, 2021; Rosa, 2021; Wullum, 2021), point to the need for more flexible promotion criteria to support equal opportunities.

The findings show that men are more likely to believe in equal opportunities, yet women report carrying heavier administrative burdens and receiving less support after parental leave. This reflects other studies indicating that academic task allocation is gendered, with women bearing more invisible and undervalued work.

To deepen the analysis, two multiple linear regression models were applied. The first examined satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality. Positive organizational culture emerged as the strongest predictor. Inclusive communication and fair career advancement significantly increased satisfaction. On the other hand, a toxic workplace environment, including perceived neglect of one's potential and experiences of bullying, harassment, and violence, decreases satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality. Parenthood also negatively impacted satisfaction, indicating ongoing challenges for academics with families.

The model's high explanatory power underscores that satisfaction is shaped more by institutional practices and everyday experiences than by demographics alone. Crucially, formal gender equality measures had no statistically significant effect, indicating a disconnect between policy and perceived impact. Personal experiences of marginalization—ridicule, dismissal of competence, and even violence—remain widespread and strongly correlated with dissatisfaction. Parenting remains an often-invisible burden, especially for women, and reflects an inflexible academic system.

Unexpectedly, caregiving and gender did not significantly predict satisfaction. However, gendered differences in caring responsibilities appeared in cross-tabulations. This suggests that while caregiving responsibilities affect career trajectories, they may not directly shape perceptions of organizational fairness. Employees may separate personal work–life balance from institutional gender policies. Alternatively, the influence of caregiving may be indirect, operating through variables such as flexibility, support structures, or experiences of discrimination.

Similarly, the fact that gender did not predict satisfaction was surprising, given prior research. This could reflect the nature of the sample—academics with PhDs and high cultural capital, who may share similar perceptions regardless of gender. Alternatively, the growing formalization of gender equality policies may obscure some gender-based perceptions. Another possibility is that personal experiences—such as being supported or excluded—play a greater role in shaping satisfaction than gender itself.

The second regression model assessed perceptions of gender equality in career advancement. Organizational culture and perceived fairness again emerged as strong positive predictors. Gender, however, was a notable negative predictor: Women were more likely to perceive inequality in promotion opportunities despite formal commitments to fairness. This finding mirrors existing research on the gap between equality rhetoric and actual workplace experiences.

Surprisingly, parenting was a positive predictor. Parents perceived the academic environment as more equitable. One of the explanations is a possible positive selection effect, where individuals who successfully balance parenthood and academic careers generally may hold more optimistic views.

In contrast, caregiving responsibilities, perceived candidacy opportunities, and feeling of being overlooked by leadership did not significantly predict perceptions of equal promotion opportunities. This suggests a more complex dynamic at play.

The lack of a caregiving effect may indicate that caring responsibilities are experienced as personal challenges rather than institutional disadvantages, perhaps reflecting some progress in accommodating family needs. Similarly, perceiving leadership candidacy as equally open does not translate into perceiving equal promotion outcomes. This may point to a situation where policies are formally inclusive, but informal norms, networks, and unspoken organizational practices continue to shape career advancement. The non-significant role of feeling overlooked by leadership is also noteworthy. While a negative experience, it may not always be attributed to gender, or it may be internalized as a personal issue rather than a symptom of systemic inequality. These nuanced findings underscore that individual experiences do not always align with broader perceptions of institutional fairness.

Taken together, these findings highlight the complexity of academic staff perceptions of gender equality within their institutions. They suggest that while structural and cultural factors such as leadership support and policy frameworks play a role, personal experiences and formal policy perceptions do not automatically translate into beliefs about overall gender equality in career advancement. This complexity highlights the need for further qualitative and longitudinal studies to better understand the interplay of personal, cultural, and structural factors.

While the study in this article has some strengths—most notably the large sample size, which allowed for both descriptive and inferential statistics, including the two regression models, which provided a more comprehensive view of gender equality in academia and valuable insights for the implementation of GEP UL—it also has limitations. These include the cross-sectional design, which restricts insight into long-term changes or causality; reliance on self-reported perceptions, which introduces potential subjectivity; a lack of focus on intersectional aspects or differences across academic disciplines; and the unexpected results (e.g., parenthood as a positive predictor of perceived equality), which require cautious interpretation and further qualitative inquiry.

Nevertheless, the results of the study are highly relevant to the implementation of the GEP UL. While initiatives such as flexible habilitation requirements and burnout prevention are included in the plan, their success will depend on consistent and effective implementation. Given the ambitious goals of GEP UL, further research is necessary to evaluate the actual impact of its measures. Monitoring and adjusting based on empirical findings will be key to ensuring that policies translate into tangible improvements.

7. Conclusion

Despite growing awareness and formal commitments, gender inequalities remain evident in caregiving roles, career progression, and institutional support. Women continue to face disproportionate burdens related to care and administrative duties and report more barriers in accessing leadership roles. While the GEP UL includes important measures to address these issues, systemic change is needed with the key steps, which include enabling flexible working conditions, redistributing care responsibilities more equitably, and actively supporting women's academic advancement. Success depends on moving beyond policy declarations to real,

lived institutional commitment. The inclusion of monitoring and responsive adjustment in GEP UL is a promising sign and should be supported by ongoing empirical research and collective action within academic institutions.

Conflict of Interests
Vesna Leskošek was the head of the Working Group for the Preparation of the GEP UL. She is currently serving as the head of the Working Group for Monitoring the Implementation of the GEP UL, with Alenka Švab as a member (their mandate runs from April 2023 to September 2025). Alenka Švab was also the head of the Working Group for the Preparation of the Guidelines for Gender Equality in the Field of Work–Life Balance at UL.

LLMs Disclosure
The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT for linguistic corrections.

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