Partners’ financial support is holding female academics back

A resulting sense of obligation often leaves women unable to relocate for better or more secure jobs, says Lara McKenzie

August 5, 2021

Lara McKenzie

Source: Getty

I interviewed Evelyn in my office late one afternoon as a part of my research into academics in insecure jobs in Australia. Since finishing her PhD two years earlier, she had been working on short, part-time contracts. She was in her early thirties but she and her partner – who had been together for 11 years – had not yet had children.

They would “love” to do so, she told me, but she didn’t see how she could – not only financially but “emotionally, probably, as well, having that insecurity in life…I just don’t feel audacious enough.”

Such sentiments were echoed throughout my interviews. Evelyn told me that most of her older female colleagues had waited until they had secure jobs before trying to have children – but by then it was often too late.

My research and that of others has continually shown that insecure university work disproportionately impacts women’s lives and careers. However, things do not

necessarily improve when women finally gain permanency, especially if they go on to have children.

On the face of things, universities are more equal workplaces than most. They offer better access to parental leave, for instance. However, even before Covid, it was estimated that less than a third of Australian academics were on ongoing contracts: a quarter were fixed-term and nearly half were casuals. Casuals are not eligible for paid parental leave, and fixed-term workers are often excluded too.

Moreover, about 60 per cent of casuals and 76 per cent of part-time employees in Australia are women. And countries like Australia have experienced continuing academic job losses since the pandemic began, as funding from international students dried up; the first to go, inevitably, were the insecurely employed. In Australia, about 13 per cent of university employees lost their jobs in 2020, with losses heavily weighted towards those on precarious or part-time contracts.

The full impact of this on women is not yet known, but there is no doubt that the pandemic has further disadvantaged women. In Australia, research shows that domestic, home-schooling and caring responsibilities (for relatives as well as for children) are now more unevenly divided than before, even when both partners work. This is almost certainly why, since early 2020, scholarly journals have reported a massive decline in the number of submissions from women and an increase from men.

In considering the issues faced by women in academia, however, we need to look not only at women's struggles – the unequal care work, financial strain and insecure employment. We also need to look at the support women receive when facing those struggles. And it is not as simple as adopting the standard framing of support as something that men have too much of and women too little.

Let me explain. Academic men, it is argued, receive emotional and practical support from their partners to a much higher degree than academic women do, given the unequal distribution of childcare and domestic work. And this support allows men to carry out research and teaching without distraction. In the past, men even got help with academic work itself; the hashtag #ThanksForTyping draws attention to the extensive research, typing, translating, transcribing, editing, and proofreading work performed by countless "academic wives" – typically credited only as "my wife" in acknowledgements.

I have found that, nowadays, women also get support from partners and families. This often comes in the form of money, both during their PhDs and early on in their careers, when they have little access to paid work. But, counterintuitively, this kind of "support" often has the effect of hindering women's careers because, my interviewees told me, it can lead them to feel obligated to its provider and, therefore, unable to relocate for better or more secure jobs. The support – and sense of obligation – is all the greater if women have children.

Women also informed me that, as the secondary earners in their relationships, they took on a larger share of domestic and childcare roles. One woman reflected on how her partner had supported her "for years" and she now found herself torn between "trying to write, to manage a household, to look after my son, to spend time with my family, and to work", all while being "bound" to her home city because of her husband's work and family ties.

Women need this financial support given their over-representation in low-paid and insecure positions – in which early career academics in general are finding themselves stuck for increasingly long periods of time. Women are also lower paid and work in more junior roles, while men are more than twice as likely to be in associate professor or professor roles.

But we must reflect and act on the unequal obligations that emerge. If women are feeling that they have no choice but to take on more care work, or to stay put rather than seek better work elsewhere, we need to ask what such support is truly supporting. And we need to offer something better.

Lara McKenzie is a research fellow at the University of Western Australia.

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/partners-financial-support-holding-female-academics-back