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Systemic Sexism in Academia: New Study Outlines the Structural Hurdles Facing Women

An international team of researchers, including Professor María Piquer-Rodríguez from Freie Universität Berlin, has investigated systemic sexism in early academic careers and is calling for institutional reform

A collective of four female researchers from Canada, Argentina, and Germany has recently published a study in the journal *BioScience* exposing the systemic barriers women face in the early stages of their academic careers – particularly in STEM subjects. Their study, “Systemic Sexism in Academia – An Early Career Viewpoint,” presents a stark critique of academia’s gendered challenges and proposes actionable solutions to dismantle them.

The study identifies four major obstacles that disproportionately hinder women in academia:

1. Fostered intellectual insecurity: Women frequently contend with condescension (“mansplaining”), dismissive recognition of their achievements, and even harassment. This leads to “impostorization” – a systemic undermining of confidence that goes deeper than mere self-doubt.
2. Exclusion from the “Boys’ Club”: Male-dominated networks often sideline women, limiting access to mentorship, collaboration, and professional visibility, forcing many to work twice as hard to prove their worth.
3. Higher risks and additional challenges in fieldwork: Women face heightened safety risks during fieldwork, from sexual harassment to logistical hurdles, while also battling skepticism over the necessity of protective measures.
4. Gendered expectations and emotional labor: Unequal caregiving and domestic responsibilities create a mental load that saps productivity, forcing many women to choose between personal and professional fulfillment.

The authors suggest a range of structural measures for achieving more gender equity in academia, including gender-inclusive appointment procedures, improved opportunities to balance research with family life, and effective antidiscrimination guidelines. Specifically, they propose three reforms:

1. Strengthen representation and leadership opportunities: Implement gender-balanced quotas, blind peer reviews, and the formal recognition of “invisible labor” (mentorship, service work) in career promotions.
2. Restructure career support systems: Guarantee paid parental leave, on-campus childcare, flexible schedules, and adjusted workloads to level the playing field.
3. Foster accountability and allyship: Enforce anti-harassment policies, integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion into institutional culture, and train bystanders to challenge discrimination in daily interactions.

“Despite making up nearly half of early-career researchers, women are still underrepresented in STEM leadership. This study is a rallying cry for universities, funding bodies, and policymakers to confront the systemic biases women face. The solutions offered are not just about fairness but about strengthening academia by retaining diverse talent,” says Piquer-Rodríguez.

wissenschaftliche Ansprechpartner:

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