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Informality, emotion and gendered career paths: The hidden toll of maternity leave on female academics and researchers

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While the negative impact of child-raising and caring on women's career progression in academia is well-established, less is known about the role of academic women's lived experiences of maternity leave as an institutional practice. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study of the lived experiences of female academics and researchers in an Irish university. The analysis intrinsically links organizational structures and problems with the lived and felt dimensions of work. The findings point to the need for better structural accommodations for maternity leave which address the relationship between caring and career disadvantage within academia. The article adds to existing literature on the intersection of motherhood and academia by unpicking the specific role of maternity leave as both a lived experience and an institutional practice that can reinforce gender inequalities in academia.

KEYWORDS

career disadvantage, caring, emotions, gender inequality, maternity leave, structural obstacles

1 | INTRODUCTION

International and national literature consistently demonstrates that childbearing and child-raising have a negative impact on the career progression of female academics and researchers (Ahmad, 2017; Byrne & Keher Dillon, 1996; Klocker & Drozdziewski, 2012). However, little research has focused in detail on the specific role of women's experiences of maternity leave, as a pivotal moment in the negotiation of work and caring, in contributing to or exacerbating gender inequality in academic careers. Moreover, academic women's lived experiences of pregnancy in the workplace and of taking maternity leave tend to remain invisible, unspoken and ignored in the public discourse of academia. In order to better understand the less visible processes that contribute to career disadvantage over time,

there is a need for an in-depth exploration of *how* pregnancy and maternity leave are experienced by women in academia and the implications of these experiences for women's status, position, wellbeing and long-term career progression.

Byrne & Keher Dillon (1996) conducted research on academic women's experiences of maternity leave in the Irish university context in the mid-1980s. They found a situation where many women were not receiving their full entitlement to maternity leave, were working during their period of statutory leave or developing strategies to get the work done somehow and were very reliant on the (unreliable) goodwill and support of colleagues and Heads. Thirty years later, as academics and researchers working in an Irish university and conducting an action-research project on gender equality in research, we were struck by the continued relevance of Byrne & Keher Dillon's (1996) study, which pointed to issues that we felt were still of concern in the current context. This led us to ask the question — what, if anything, has changed?

Arising from this, this article is based on the findings of a recent qualitative research project which explored, through an online qualitative survey, over 70 female academics and researchers' personal experiences of maternity leave in an Irish university context. It examines the levies exacted from women not simply in terms of lost, delayed or truncated career opportunities, but also explores the unforeseen emotional effects on women of their experiences of pregnancy and subsequent maternity leave. An examination of these issues provides one lens through which the doing of gender in the academy can be interrogated further. Personal experiences of maternity leave tend to remain unspoken and invisible in public discourses of academia and are related to what Gattrell (2011) calls the 'secrecy and silence' surrounding pregnancy itself in the workplace. In this article, we draw on women's own stories of taking maternity leave in a university context to reveal the invisible toll it takes on women's career progression and workplace experiences. Methodologically, we privilege women's personal testimony to provide a considered appraisal of the everyday reproduction of gendered disadvantage in academic and research careers. The processes, practices and power relations that contribute to the disadvantages that accrue to women who take maternity leave in academia are unpacked and conceptualized.

2 | DOING GENDER IN ACADEMIA

Women's experiences of maternity leave in the academy are understood here in terms of the wider context of the gendered nature of academic and university environments. A substantial body of literature and research attests to the persistence of gender inequalities in academic and research careers, gender-insensitive working environments and masculinist cultures in universities and in academic research, including the specific inequalities relating to motherhood and caring (e.g., Knights & Richards, 2003; O'Connor, 2010; Savonick & Davidson, 2015; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). The role of gendering processes and gendered practices in producing and reproducing these outcomes has been highlighted (O'Connor, O'Hagan, & Brannen, 2015; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009). Acker (2006) develops the concept of 'inequality regimes' within work organizations to refer to the ways in which gender inequalities are continuously (re)produced through organizing processes that are not gender-neutral and that can be more or less formal and more or less visible. In university contexts, much research has explored these processes of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987), demonstrating how practices such as recruitment, promotion, organization of work and conduct of research all have gendered dimensions that reproduce gender inequalities (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Morley, 2013; Probert, 2005; Van den Brink, Brouns, & Waslander, 2006).

These practices and processes of 'doing gender' also manifest themselves through everyday lived experiences of working in academic institutions — as embodied, material and emotional encounters with (gendered) university cultures and structures. We draw inspiration from Savigny (2014) who focuses on lived experiences in order to explore how gender is 'done' in universities — how it is 'negotiated, contested, renegotiated and re-enacted in organisations through local and collective practices' (p. 797). In her study with academic women, Savigny (2014) reveals the concrete everyday ways in which cultural sexism operates in universities. Through women's *own* stories of their

experiences and encounters, the workings of gendered practices are rendered visible. This points to the insights that can be gleaned by accessing the voices of those most affected by unequal power relations. For example, Leberman, Eames, and Barnett (2016), through an exploration of academic women's subjective experiences of the research funding process, identify the lack of institutional support as a key factor reproducing gender inequities in research funding.

It is well recognized that academic work environments are constructed in ways that result in particular career penalties for female academics and researchers who have children (Ahmad, 2017; Klocker & Drozdziewski, 2012; Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). Family formation and child-raising result in truncated, broken or non-linear career paths for women, having a particularly negative impact on career progression in the academy. Studies point to the role of rigid 'ideal worker' models of academic career progression in disadvantaging those who have primary responsibilities for raising children (especially when such responsibilities coincide with the early stages of the career path), along with the lack of family friendly working environments in academia (Ahmad, 2017). Some have highlighted the incompatibility of the demands of academic work (in a context of expanding neoliberal rationalities alongside continuity of traditionally masculinist cultures) on the one hand and the gendered demands of caring work on the other (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Grummell, Devine, & Lynch, 2009; Raddon, 2002). How these contradictions are experienced on a day-to-day basis on the frontline by female academics and researchers who have children is a centrally important dimension of this.

While much existing literature focuses on the broader context of motherhood and caring in academia, maternity leave as one key aspect of this can be viewed as a pivotal moment in the negotiation of motherhood and work and as an institutional practice through which gender is 'done' in the academy. For example, in the Portuguese context, research by Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso (2008) found that informal cultures surrounding the taking of maternity leave meant that in reality maternity seemed to be condemned by institutions. They found that institutions did not always fully implement legislation or provide replacements for staff on maternity leave and that the legal protection for maternity leave could become in effect 'an empty shell'. This echoes the findings of Fodor and Glass (2018) with reference to the private sector in Hungary where parental and maternity leave provisions have become increasingly informal, individualized and subject to negotiation. Similarly, Byrne and Keher Dillon (1996) research in the Irish context also highlighted the problem of informality in the management of maternity leave and the general failure of academic institutions to adapt to women's dual careers. How maternity leave is managed, including how it is received by co-workers, in the workplace plays a crucial role in framing female academics' and researchers' experiences as both mothers and workers.

The role of emotions in women's lives has been conceptualized by a range of social theorists in different ways. This article draws on work that views emotions and emotion work in the workplace as highly gendered and unequal. Emotion is central to how gendered power relations play out in organizations (Knights & Surman, 2008; Lewis & Simpson, 2007), not least in academic environments such as universities (Askins & Blazek, 2017). Hochschild's (1983, 2012) influential work has highlighted the gendered nature of expectations and practices relating to how emotions are displayed, considered and managed in the workplace. This draws attention to the ways in which emotion is embedded within and integral to gendered workplace cultures and structures. We draw on these conceptualizations to explore how maternity leave in a specific academic workplace is experienced by female academics. The data reveal that a considerable emotional toll and subjective management of structural problems was widely evident at the individual level. Maternity leave is a point at which women's distinctive role as mothers becomes both privately internalized by individual women and publicly positioned in academic career structures. Isgro and Castañeda's (2015) analysis of the personal testimonies of mothers in US academia calls for a shift towards a culture of care in higher education as an approach to addressing the injustices embedded in academic structures. This call is echoed by Askins and Blazek (2017) in their exploration of the role of emotions in academia. They argue that emotions are central to the everyday structural conditions of work in the neoliberal academy. Despite this, the emotional fallout of maternity leave and the hidden toll on women themselves who have gone through this have received little attention to date.

3 | THE CONTEXT

The persistence of gender inequality in higher education in Ireland is well-recognized (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2016, 2017). Figures published by the HEA (2017, p. 3) highlight that only 21 per cent of Professors across all universities in the state are female, though 51 per cent of Lecturers are female. Additionally, governance and management structures in all universities are gender-imbalanced, with females a minority on key bodies such as Academic Councils and Executive Management Teams (HEA, 2016, 2017). Other research has highlighted the role of structural and cultural factors such as the existence of a 'careless culture' in academic management (Grummell et al., 2009), the casualization of academic labour (Courtois & O'Keeffe, 2015), masculinist academic cultures (O'Connor et al., 2015) and gendered notions of academic excellence (O'Connor et al., 2015) in reproducing gendered practices and processes in academic careers and cultures in Irish universities.

A 'maternalist ethos' has developed in policy provision in relation to gender, work and family in Ireland (Moss, 2014). Contemporary provision of maternity leave may be traced to the 1970s when gender equality began to be a factor within the legislative and policy framework in addressing the intersection of gender and employment (Connolly, 2003). In the interim, Ireland has developed 'a strong legislative framework for equality and non-discrimination' (Barry, 2015, p. 8). In the policy realm, developments since the 1990s have affected measures to 'reconcile work and family life' (Daly & Clavero, 2002, p. 4). However, Daly (2011, p. 2) problematizes both the propensity for gender to be 'cast in the shade' as family policy takes precedence and the gender connotations of this as 'the absence of attention to gender equality and the construction of many of the reforms in gender-neutral terms act as to endorse familization' (p. 16). Overall, in Ireland, it may be said that 'state support for caring is low, and government policy is predicated on there being one female carer in the home to care' (Russell, O'Connell, & McGinnity, 2007, p. 3), while O'Hagan (2018) points to the persistence of complex inequalities at the intersection of maternity with paid work. The maternalist orientation in family policy is reflected in the low level of statutory support for paternity leave, which was introduced in 2016 and is limited to two consecutive weeks for fathers who meet the qualifying criteria.[1]

Maternity leave is a statutory entitlement for women who become pregnant while in employment in Ireland. A pregnant employee is currently entitled to 26 consecutive weeks of maternity leave and 16 consecutive weeks' additional optional maternity leave beginning immediately after the end of the 26 weeks. Employees who have paid sufficient social insurance (PRSI) contributions are entitled to maternity benefit, payable by the Department of Social Protection, while employees who pay social insurance contributions at a sufficient level may receive full pay from the employer while on maternity leave, as is the case in universities. However, in universities, a key issue is the question of replacement of academic and research staff who are on maternity leave, with policies and practices on this varying considerably.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This study of women's experiences of maternity leave in an Irish university setting was conducted as part of a larger European Union (EU) funded project that sought to promote gender equality[2] through an action-research approach to change in academic institutions. This involved developing, promoting and implementing a tailored gender equality action plan in the institution through an iterative action-research process which involved reviewing international research, conducting institutional research and engaging with stakeholders. The approach was grounded in an action-research cycle of mapping and refining actions, implementing actions, reflecting and specifying learning (Archibong et al., 2016; GENOVATE, 2016; see also Doherty & Manfredi, 2006). Action research provides a valuable framework for organizational change because of its 'commitment to involving people in the diagnosis of and finding solutions to problems rather than imposing on them solutions to pre-defined problems' (Bryman, 2012, p. 397). In this spirit, we specifically conducted *qualitative* research with female academic and research staff in the organization with

the goal of documenting their experiences of maternity leave and enabling a better understanding of the under-acknowledged problems that women *themselves* were experiencing, including their subjective emotional responses to and feelings about what at face value is a direct statutory entitlement. The aim of the larger project underpinning this research was to produce a body of evidence that could contribute to greater visibility and institutional knowledge of these experiences and hence to inform the development of actions to address the issues. The research on maternity leave experiences did contribute (along with other sectoral developments at the time) to raising awareness institutionally of the issues. As a direct outcome of the research, we produced a set of Guiding Principles for Management of Maternity and Family Leave for the university and secured institutional commitment to addressing the issues, including the establishment of a university working group to oversee reforms on maternity/family leave arrangements.

The research conducted on maternity leave was influenced by the principles of feminist methodology in its commitment to foregrounding women's lived experiences in the act of revealing (and ultimately undoing) gendered processes (Byrne & Lentin, 2000). The approach was explicitly qualitative with an emphasis theoretically on empowering women to tell their stories in their own words. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the experiences of maternity leave and pregnancy in the workplace, and the potential vulnerability of women employees in relation to this, we made the decision to protect their identities by collecting data through an online anonymous qualitative survey. Others have highlighted the advantages of online spaces for conducting research with women by providing safe environments for articulating experiences and views they might not feel comfortable expressing in face-to-face encounters (Madge & O'Connor, 2002). With this in mind, we designed an online qualitative survey (on a secure platform) consisting of a series of mainly open-ended questions about participants' experiences of maternity leave taken at any stage of their career while in the institution. Questions were asked about their experiences before, during and after taking maternity leave. A purposive sample was produced by inviting participants via an email distributed in two rounds (July and September 2014) to an existing mailing list of people who had participated in a previous project aimed at female academics and researchers. The only inclusion criteria were that participants should be in academic or research posts and should have taken maternity leave at some stage in their careers in the institution. It was not intended to be a quantitative or representative sample (which could lead to some women being identifiable) and it is possible that those who decided to participate particularly felt they had something to say on the question of maternity leave. It was important to us to capture these voices given our goal, in line with our feminist epistemology, of documenting the often unspoken experiences. The final sample comprised 71 female academic and research staff who had taken maternity leave in the institution (43 completed questionnaires and 28 partially completed). The average age of respondents was 42 years old and the median age of their youngest child was three years old. A wide range of disciplinary backgrounds were represented. While most respondents had permanent or 'indefinite' employment contracts, there were six respondents on temporary or casual contracts. Of the 43 respondents who fully completed questionnaires, 21 were in lecturer posts with smaller numbers in senior lecturer, professorial or research posts. The qualitative data were analysed thematically through multiple rounds of reading and re-reading and developing a theoretically informed understanding of the material. Some of the key themes to emerge from the analysis are discussed and conceptualized here.

5 | UNDERSTANDING THE INVISIBLE TOLL(S) OF LEAVE

Much has been written on the demands placed on working parents and dual-career families in relation to issues such as childcare, work–life balance, the domestic division of labour and motherhood (e.g., Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). This research focused, however, on a particular sector of women workers (academics) and on a particular phase of reproductive history and motherhood (pregnancy and maternity leave) in an Irish university. Such an approach allows micro experiences to be linked to broader structural trends. Critical themes that emerged in qualitative data from the online survey are discussed in this section. The institution in which the research was undertaken could be considered to take, at the time of the survey, a relatively 'light' management approach to the management of maternity and

family leave; that is, there was compliance with statutory obligations but a lack of a comprehensive policy for all concerned on managing leave. More recently, there have been increased efforts to address this, in part in response to the findings of our action-based research combined with sectoral pressure to address gender inequality in Irish universities in recent years.[3] The data gathered here suggest that the women's engagement with organizational structures started from a position of vulnerability and structural disadvantage, primarily due to the lack of a comprehensive policy on the management of maternity leave cover at the time.

The hidden toll(s), both personal and professional, endured by women who experience pregnancy and subsequently maternity leave are patently illustrated in the practices, processes and power relations women have to engage in or are subjected to during pregnancy, maternity leave and on return to work. Other studies have highlighted the hidden negotiations and conflicts that characterize maternity leave and pregnancy at work (e.g., Buzzanell & Liu, 2007; Mäkelä, 2012) but these take on a particular specificity in academic work environments and career structures. The intersection between domestic and academic spheres is a key site of examination and discussion internationally with regards to women's unequal progression and advancement within academia. As Wright (2002, p. 7) asserts, 'an academic career is basically competitive' and 'is pyramidical in structure and is predicated primarily on achievement in research [even as] teaching and administration are increasingly being taken into account in policies of promotion'. Time out of such an intense environment has implications then for promotion and progression. 'For female academics, this has particular resonances and repercussions, regardless of their career aspirations, as institutional practices favour those without family responsibilities' (Baker, 2008, p. 1) and women continue to meet stumbling blocks that their male colleagues do not (Rice, 2012, p. 18).

5.1 | Maternity leave as a 'burden': Empirical evidence

The dominant responses to our survey highlighted shortcomings in how maternity leave is provided for in the university and, significantly, indicates heavy tolls on many of the women who took maternity leave during their academic career. However, it must be acknowledged at the outset that there were some respondents who expressed satisfaction with their experiences of maternity leave in this institution:

Gemma: [4]*I have had 3 positive experiences. No complaints whatsoever.*

Cara: *I experienced my immediate work environment as supportive. Having suffered severely during my pregnancies with illness [details omitted to protect anonymity], my immediate line managers did their best to alleviate any anxiety I felt and tried to put in place supportive structures.*

Rose: *Quite supportive. I feel lucky I have a fairly supportive head of department.*

Support, however, in many instances was wholly contingent on the attitudes of individual managers in departments at the time of pregnancy as illustrated by Mary and Freya:

Mary: *Supported by colleagues but not by HoD [Head of Department]. No offer to provide assistance with workload during pregnancy.*

Freya: *Very supportive on last two pregnancies. Am going on maternity leave in ___ and not very supportive this time due to a change in Head of School.*

Support was in evidence from 'individuals' within work units, within the Human Resources Department and from Heads of Departments/Schools but their individualized approach towards pregnancy and maternity leave emerged as a critical factor in how women experienced pregnancy and maternity leave rather than a coordinated managerial approach.

Several other respondents highlighted the difficulties they encountered during pregnancy and maternity leave, difficulties attributed to the structural and cultural environment of the institution which had negative effects on individual women, their relationships with colleagues and their sense of themselves as future employees of the

university. The experience of maternity leave as a 'burden' in terms of bureaucracy and its effects on colleagues' workloads due to the absence of supports to facilitate leave emerged as a notable 'load' for women to shoulder and negotiate at an emotionally demanding time (prior to and after childbirth).

As survey participants Sarah, Saoirse and Kate, respectively, recounted, the way in which gender is entrenched in academic culture and its organizational structure becomes explicit when the issue of maternity arises. Prevalent negative attitudes to women who are pregnant or on maternity leave were also widely reported by the women in this research:

Sarah: *I have been informed by many senior academics, that having children and working in academia has been frowned upon by male counterparts (and some females). This has been my experience in the past, however I'm hopeful that this will change.*

Saoirse: *... the Chair in the Department has open views about women having too much leave if they have more than one or two children. Maternity leave is viewed very negatively by senior men in my department despite some of them being fathers themselves and particularly if the woman is senior and paid well.*

Kate: *I feel the organisational structure within the university is negatively skewed against women and mothers in particular.*

As these quotes illustrate, in order to understand why prospective and actual motherhood negatively impacts on female academics (Byrne & Keher Dillon, 1996; Monroe et al., 2014; Rice, 2011), it is necessary to look at how maternity leave intersects with gendered organizational cultures. Kate's view (above) indicates the structural obstacles women experience in a context in which masculinity is implicitly valorized within management structures (O'Connor & Carvalho, 2015). This has implications for women and men who do not conform to typically masculinist values and behaviours (Knights & Richards, 2003) and, for women who have children during the course of their academic and research careers, it crucially reveals the 'care-less' context of academia and the 'care ceiling' those with primary care responsibilities encounter (Grummell et al., 2009). Both the express and implicit views of senior colleagues, as recounted by Sarah, Kate and Saoirse, (re)produce 'cultural assumptions' which associate women who are mothers with the private 'domestic' sphere (Savigny, 2014, p. 803) and thus reinforce the masculinism of the academic institutional environment (Gattrell, 2011; Knights & Richards, 2003). Thus, maternity leave can be theorized as an arena through which women may encounter the everyday cultural sexism of their institutions.

The hidden personal and professional costs of taking maternity leave are inextricably linked to the ways in which such leave is perceived within the university. Close examination of the survey data reveals that lack of support for women taking maternity leave is expressed informally at the unit/local level and is mediated by broader institutional practices such as whether paid cover is provided during periods of maternity leave or whether clear policies exist on best practice for handling such a sensitive issue. Some of the research participants in this study were acutely aware of how their reproductive choices and patterns were perceived as a drain on the resources of the organization and a negative imposition on local work units, a situation exacerbated by financial constraints during an era of recession combined with a highly gendered academic work culture:

Fiona: *In the current climate maternity leave is often experienced as a 'burden' by academic staff as posts are not being replaced. Maternity leave and parental leave should be unnegotiable entitlements.*

Nathalie: *If someone becomes pregnant it seems there's a collective sigh, as now there will be a period of instability, and over burdening with no back up centrally from HR or ___. It would be improved in general if there was a sense that the university supported women and men who have families by providing cover to those who are on leave — and that it would be in place without question.*

Deirdre: *I do think that there is still pressure on women to discharge their teaching and other tasks before and after their maternity leave, working double or nearly. In a period as Head of a unit, I experienced the entirely unacceptable situation stemming from the cover for maternity leave substitution in the debt crisis; this is iniquitous, putting major pressure on women not to reproduce. It amounts to a return to the bad old days when*

no formal maternity leave provision existed in the university sector; women about ten years my senior were
expected to return to work within a month, or less of giving birth.

Ellen: It deals with it [maternity leave] on a legal basis. It complies with the law. The lack of replacement for you
while you're on mat leave means that you're enemy number one in your place because all your colleagues have
got to pick up your work. It creates a rather tense environment.

Respondents in this research emphasized that the university met and complied with its statutory obligations
regarding maternity leave but the hidden, deeply felt lived experiences of women taking leave that we reveal illus-
trate that the issue of maternity leave and the implications of being on leave for the woman, work units, colleagues
and students, is a source of tension, stress and felt injustice. The felt vulnerabilities that respondents experienced and
expressed in this research can be attributed to a cultural environment that approaches (and meets) its formal obliga-
tions with regard to equality but leaves women on the margins of the institutional landscape and very often in posi-
tions of powerlessness. This points to the less visible ways in which gendered inequalities are reproduced through
institutional practices: 'It is tempting to regard universities as hospitable places for women' (Davies & Holloway,
1995, p. 11) though as Davies and Holloway (1995, p. 12) go on to illustrate, evidence mitigates against such percep-
tions. The existence of recession and retrenchment compounded the pressure the women in this research experi-
enced when considering their reproductive choices and the implications of those choices for their work unit and
colleagues. Effectively, maternity leave was associated with increased burdens for women taking leave and their col-
leagues, echoing the experiences documented by Byrne & Keher Dillon (1996) 30 years previously.

5.2 | Informal practices and burdensome workloads: Minimizing the disruption of maternity leave

The lack of a comprehensive written policy or strategy with regard to the planning and organization of maternity
leave relegated the women in our study organization to a weak position as individual agents interacting with an orga-
nizational structure that is in itself gendered and in which maternity is a disruption to the ideal career trajectory and
flow of business (Acker, 1990; Britton & Logan, 2008). As discussed above, maternity leave was frequently con-
structed as a 'burden' to be dealt with by Heads at local level in the institution and a further effect of this was to
transfer the 'burden' onto the women themselves. The interaction between the institutional structure and culture
at the macro and micro levels of the organization left many women brokering local informal practices and attitudes
with individual Heads. As indicated above, whilst some of the women in this study did have positive experiences
of pregnancy at work and maternity leave and attested to a 'supportive' environment, many found themselves in
positions where they acquired additional workloads prior to or post maternity leave, and, in some cases, were either
expected to or felt they had to continue working whilst on leave.

Nathalie: I think HR follows a clear enough broad policy, but it is left to departments to manage and it all depends on
the department level of management and this seems unfair. Another colleague in a different department was
facilitated so she wasn't teaching in the latter part of pregnancy, in my department, my teaching from term
2 was moved to term 1 so I could do all my teaching duties before going on leave. This did not help my
health or my pregnancy and I was put on bed rest towards the very end by my doctor so I ended up feeling
like I had let my students down and department was scrambling to cover ends of courses. This was an
avoidable scenario. I have heard this happening in other departments also. I felt I had no options and that
I had to do this.

Jane: During maternity leave I was asked to: (i) prepare a new module to be given on my return to college; (ii)
my academic timetable was rearranged, so that I would give full academic workload on my return to
college between January and March, without being informed previously; (iii) supervise postdoc and attend
meetings.

Lorraine: *... there is little support for women in terms of workload cover. I found my workload increased as a direct consequence of my maternity leave during the second term of the academic year. Not only there is no understanding of how this impacts young mothers at the level of heads of school and managers (or maybe there is, but it's not a priority for them), I don't think Human Resources is much concerned with these practices within academic departments either. They are under the illusion that all academic staff are privileged. But I think there are huge issues in relation to maternity leave for female junior academic staff.*

Roisín: *My workload was completely altered. Areas I taught were moved so that I could teach them when I returned in term 2. It resulted in me having a MASSIVE workload on return to work — effectively an entire academic year of teaching squeezed into one term!*

As the observations above suggest, many women appear to feel they have no option but to comply with arrangements even in instances where it presented them with structural difficulties. Respondents felt, or were made to feel, responsible for the perceived complications their absence presented for their colleagues and work unit, even where the assumed responsibilities infringed on statutory leave rights. In other words, the way the institution made them *feel* played a key role in the practices that ensued. Therefore, drawing on Askins and Blazek (2017), not only are emotions (such as guilt, responsibility) produced by academic structures and norms, they in turn actively (re)produce social relations and practices across the academy.

The workloads women assumed or were tasked with, for the most part, encompassed the 'housekeeping' work of the university, teaching and administration (Lynch, 2010) rather than research work, the critical component for career progression (European University Institute, 2013). The practices that emerged in this study, including front-loading teaching and administrative duties prior to leave or 'saving' it for return, are remarkably consistent regardless of discipline or other variables such as contract type. As Lorraine outlines above, these are practices that are under the radar of management and demonstrate the institution divesting itself of 'the necessity' to deal with maternity leave, thereby conceptualizing the issue as a female problem (Byrne & Keher Dillon, 1996, p. 3). Women privately report they are quietly paying the price not only in terms of taking on extra work but in some cases with negative impacts on health and wellbeing. Overall, the experience in this institution of being pregnant at work and taking maternity leave emerged as one dependent on whether a woman found herself in the 'fortunate' position of being within 'a supportive department' or otherwise. The vagaries of such experiences and an overall lack of consistency between local and institutional practices facilitates a climate where approaches to maternity leave are free to be interpreted and managed. Women have to fit with institutional practices rather than the institution providing equally accessible accommodations and supports to facilitate mothers and the units in which they are employed.

5.3 | Contract researchers and maternity: Additional layers of invisible tolls

The impact of career breaks in academic work cultures is most starkly illustrated with regards to female researchers whose careers are dependent on continued external funding and where taking maternity leave can have major repercussions not only on their career prospects but their continued ability to earn a livelihood, due to the fixed-term and often precarious nature of research contracts (Pembroke, Wickham, & Bobek, 2017, pp. 4–5). This emerged as a major issue in this research and highlights the particular vulnerabilities that researchers, on funded contracts, are faced with when dealing with maternity leave.

Leah: *Research staff are at a distinct disadvantage following maternity leave and the limitations on grant funding.*

A critical issue for research staff on funded contracts can be the lack of clarity and ambiguity with regards to payments of benefits during the period of maternity leave, depending on the funding source.[5] A striking feature of this ambiguous situation is that all parties (women taking leave, managers and administrators) appeared to be unclear

what entitlements accrue to women in these positions and the lack of formal understanding means women have to use any available means to source information:

Brooke: *In _____ when I went on my first maternity leave my supervisor had to involve himself in a lengthy e-mail exchange with HR in order for me to receive maternity pay. On another occasion a pregnant postdoc from another lab cornered me in the toilet to ask about my experience of maternity leave for researchers. The procedures and her entitlements were not clear to her.*

Sonia: *HR office were very helpful in explaining my entitlements, however, it was stressful for me as neither HR [n]or I knew whether I would be receiving full maternity leave up until the week before I delivered my baby — all because I was on a research contract. This issue really needs to be resolved.*

This situation, auguring both financial and job insecurity, brings additional stress at a time when women are already vulnerable:

Miriam: *Uncertainty on my future contract has placed undue stress on me at a vulnerable time.*

Teah: *From the perspective of a contract researcher I have had uncertainty around maternity benefits. My first mat leave in ____ was unpaid (PRSI benefit only). The second was paid because the dates of my contract included the mat leave. The most recent was interesting! My contract was for 1 year which would have included the mat leave but with an option to review at 6 months. They terminated the contract at 6 months just before I was to go on leave so I was only entitled to PRSI benefit. Having worked in ____ for the last ___ years this financial uncertainty has been a source of worry.*

Pregnancy and the prospect of maternity leave reveal the layered uncertainties and the ambiguities that ensue when grant management policies do not incorporate career breaks. These factors further contribute to the leaky pipeline phenomenon among early career and postdoctoral researchers and illustrate how practices surrounding maternity leave and grant management work to continuously reproduce gender inequalities in academia. Researchers on fixed-term contracts are particularly vulnerable with regard to maternity leave and face a number of pressures and possible penalties in terms of finance, career continuity and progression (Ahmad, 2017). As the respondents in our study articulated, such uncertainty also has psychological impacts upon women in terms of their emotional wellbeing and vulnerability to stress. The lack of structural and 'collectively shared' mechanisms across the institution to support all women and their colleagues to facilitate pregnancy and maternity leave effectively means that women are almost entirely dependent on the informal 'benevolence' of unit managers, Heads and their colleagues. In such situations, there are no guarantees that practices, views and behaviours towards pregnancy and maternity leave will either be sensitive to or have regard for the wellbeing of the pregnant woman. The emotions expressed in the data because of such uncertainty and precarity sharply illustrate this.

5.4 | Flexible work practices post maternity leave

The study also explored whether or not coping with the demands of pregnancy or other caring duties when pregnant was supported by flexible work options. Whilst women were 'encouraged' to take on tasks that impacted on their workload, often due to perceived concerns due to their 'absence', it appears some were discouraged from availing of policy provisions, such as flexible hours and parental leave, implemented to cater for family circumstances. One respondent illustrated the positive effects of a proactive approach to facilitating such provisions:

Sonia: *I received great flexibility for my work hours while I was pregnant and when I returned to work after maternity leave. I was able to take parental leave on a Friday, which has made such a difference to our quality of family life, also I have a sizeable commute to _____ each morning and evening, so knowing that I have the flexibility to work a 4-day week, makes life so much easier.*

Sonia's experience, however, was not universal: other respondents who raised the issues of flexibility and parental leave felt these were not arrangements they could formally broach or enter into:

Ciara: *I restricted breastfeeding to nights on my return to work and supplemented it with bottle feeding during the day because I could not see how I could make it work otherwise. I was encouraged to take time informally where it did not affect my core duties etc. but discouraged from taking formal parental leave. I expected it was going to be very difficult returning to work and as a mother of a small child and it was — the juggling, the organisation involved and the sleepless nights takes its toll.*

Samantha: *... Academics are not encouraged to take parental leave and the experience of colleagues who have done this is negative and they feel their careers have been impacted and they still have the same work so I will not be taking parental leave.*

Roisín: *Fairly flexible, but you had to make it flexible and do it quietly and unofficially — many people are uncomfortable doing it this way. Breastfeeding on return would have been possible but challenging so I stopped before returning. She was less than 6 months old.*

An additional issue involves the reintegration of academic women back into the university in the immediate aftermath of maternity leave. The conditions in which women returned to work likewise tended to be premised on the presumption of the individual having to compensate for her absence subsequently rather than being compensated for the interruption maternity leave caused to her research trajectory.[6] Byrne & Keher Dillon, (1996, p. 18) suggest the attitudes of employers and colleagues affect women's perceptions of their career prospects and plans: 'This is especially crucial if women have to negotiate terms of maternity leave in an institutional setting which demands the support of both employer and colleagues.'

Combining parenting with academic work presents significant challenges as parents, and particularly mothers, are caught between the often competing and 'greedy' demands of academic career structures and family life (Coser, 1974; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017, p. 2). Flexible working time arrangements are in general associated with positive effects in addressing conflicts between work and family life; though conversely are also associated with adverse career impacts, particularly in academia (Byrne & Keher Dillon, 1996; Grove, 2015; Lewis & Humbert, 2010). This is pertinent for female academics who fear the impact on their careers of availing of such arrangements and of being perceived as lacking the necessary gravitas to engage in an academic career (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). As the data depict, women feel they cannot avail themselves of flexible or additional statutory provisions, at least formally, and appear to be engaging in 'bias avoidance strategies' in order to circumvent the career repercussions of, and negative perceptions of colleagues and managers towards, caring responsibilities (Drago et al., 2006). Whilst there appears to be informal licence to shape work contours in academic life, this amounts to paying 'lip service' to a family friendly environment and loads personal as well as professional costs onto mothers in terms of discomfort with loose arrangements and circumscribing of their caring obligations and preferences in the face of structural obstacles. These arrangements are made possible in part through emotional pressure in the form of institutional expectations and the anxieties and fears engendered by a highly competitive career structure that fails to adequately compensate for caring responsibilities and prioritizes very high outputs. Women take subjective account of the views of managers and colleagues and of past experiences of colleagues and, fearful of potential negative effects on their careers, adjust their patterns of care to adapt to institutional priorities and thus accommodate 'the conflicting rhythms and requirements' (Spalter-Roth, Kennelly, & Erskine, 2004, p. 4) of parenthood and academic careers. This is often to the detriment of emotional wellbeing as '*the juggling, the organisation involved and the sleepless nights takes its toll*' (Ciara). In this context, a small number of respondents reveal the impact of post maternity leave juggling on their households. Fiona cites her role as her family's sole breadwinner as a source of pressure:

My first day back to work, I was expressing milk in the toilets! I didn't experience that flexible working was an option for me at the time. Again, that was affected by the fact that I was the only income earner in my household.

Support, or lack of it, on the home front after maternity leave emerges as a consideration for some:

My maternity leave and pregnancy set me back a couple of years. But for me this is an ongoing issue. My kid is (5–10 years old) and I still find it hard to go to conferences, which has a very negative impact on my career. But who am I going to leave her with if I need to travel abroad? Things may be different if I had more support at home, but that is not my case. (Lorraine)

In contrast, Cara's partner's working arrangements are identified as critical to her career progression:

However, this progression has impacted on family life in that my partner has worked only part-time to facilitate my career progression given that I earned more. This, of course, has nothing per se to do with [name of institution withheld for anonymity] and is part of family negotiations around work/life balance, child-care costs and all the rest. The point I think I am trying to make is that with a partner in full-time employment, my progression in [name of institution] would have been radically different.

These respondents' experiences highlight the continual negotiation and trading that women are engaged in. On the one hand, they are cognisant of punitive career effects if they avail of leave arrangements and on the other, their careers may be contingent too on whether or not they have the necessary support in their private domain of the home to sustain such a career. In such situations, women may not experience work and home as 'two distinctly separate spheres of life' (Runté & Mills, 2004, p. 238) but as orbits whose intersection requires delicate and diplomatic balancing.

5.5 | The impact of pregnancy and maternity leave on promotion and progression

A significant number of respondents in this study stated that they *expected* that maternity leave would have a detrimental impact on their promotion/progression prospects and several had directly experienced this. The impact of leave on research outputs is a major area of concern given the central role of research productivity in promotion processes within the academic environment and the continued dominance of 'using research quality metrics developed for full-time uninterrupted employment' (O'Brien & Hapgood, 2012, p. 1003). Concerns about likely negative career repercussions due to pregnancy and maternity leave are interlaced with acutely felt perceptions that women who take maternity leave are relegated to the institutional sidelines and have to 'compensate' for their absence due to maternity leave:

Mary: *Competition for Academic posts and promotion may make it more difficult for female staff members to progress unless they continue research and publications during pregnancy and maternity leave, particularly if they have more than one child during their early career years.*

Cleo: *... not really, I did some work during maternity leave to maintain publication profile.*

Lorraine: *You are made feel almost as if you've been on holidays, and as if it is now your turn to do all this ungrateful work [mostly admin and teaching], that you have no right to demand or complain after being away. This can have a very negative impact on one's research profile.*

Lorraine's words are revealing ('*You are made feel almost as if ...*'). The messages that are received by the women are conveyed informally and implicitly and are experienced affectively. In the absence of clear and consistent practice around how leave is managed, work practices seem to rely on producing (often unspoken) emotions or feelings — such as guilt, gratitude and responsibility — which make certain practices possible.

Gemma: *Worked as if I wasn't pregnant on no. 1 and 2 — simply couldn't maintain that level of work on number 3 pregnancy. After my periods of maternity leave I became incredibly efficient and have hardly taken a lunch break away from my desk since!*

Elaine: *I don't think my career prospects have been affected — I took 6 months leave for all 3 of my children. I did*
             remain in contact with work while on leave and did continue with some of my research projects.

Tara: *I can no longer work evenings and weekends. Most researchers and academics do work long hours. Even if I do*
             not take parental leave, I am going to be less productive than I might otherwise have been because I choose to
             put my family first in evenings and weekends. Research is vital in my field. I fully expect that it will take me
             longer than it might otherwise have done to achieve promotion.

Kate: *I feel am not as far along the career trajectory due to my pregnancy and maternity leave. I am trying to keep so*
             many balls in the air that it is affecting all aspects of my life. I am working excessively at my job to be the best
             educator I can be; I am completing my doctorate ____ all the time I am struggling to increase my research
             profile ...

The particular stresses and pressures of combining motherhood with an academic career, both the personal and professional challenges, appear to be keenly felt. The women in this study are cognizant of the career penalties that are likely to occur due to efforts to find a balance between work and career. In Nathalie's words (above) '*it is utterly disheartening*' and for Kate '*it is affecting all aspects of my life*'. Simultaneously, women are articulating the effects of trying to maintain productivity in their work lives and attentiveness to family life; the difficulties in brokering the work–family nexus become apparent in the ways in which women either accept that their careers will be slowed or stalled as family supplants work in evenings and weekends (as Tara articulates above), or women maximize their time at work by simply working through break periods such as lunchtimes. The duties towards others that women feel they should attend to very often straddle their private and public roles:

Cara: *... During all mat leaves, I continued to supervise postgraduate students coming in to work in many cases approx*
             4 weeks after birth to meet with them. I have always had a heavy postgraduate load and with no one with exper-
             tise in the area able to take on the students, I felt it was necessary to continue with supervision.

Samantha also articulates similar sentiments in her felt duty towards her research assistant and continued to execute her role as Principal Investigator (PI) during maternity leave:

> *On my first maternity leave I was PI of a research project and continued to be involved in management of*
> *project and attended a number of meetings including in [location omitted to protect anonymity] while on*
> *leave. I felt very responsible for the researcher while on mat leave and there isn't really arrangements in*
> *place to cover this, it is up to the individual. There was no pressure from my Head of dept about this*
> *but there was also no guidance or support.*

Women's affective experiences of the work environment appear to be intensified as they broker the dual roles of parent and worker; their responses deal ostensibly with the mechanics of combining work and family life but also reveal the emotional tolls entailed. For Kate: '*... because of the pressures to achieve within the current university structures I am missing out on swathes of my children's childhood, which is very regrettable*'.

Academic success is predicated on research productivity and a linear career structure which requires the commitment of an 'ideal worker', that is, a worker unfettered by family or other commitments. Simultaneously, 'institutional accommodations' to reconcile work and family commitments are a feature of human resource management in academic environments but the continuing gendered nature of academia, and society, mitigates the effects of family friendly provisions as these 'remain largely the domain of women and marginalized by institutions' (Ahmad, 2017, p. 233). Respondents in this study identify institutional culture and structure as central to negotiating their roles as academics and parents, revealing the everyday practices through which the gendering of university structures and cultures is achieved.

6 | CONCLUSION

Patriarchal institutions, where masculinist cultures prevail and decisions about women's maternity leave entitlements are made, are not conducive to incorporating 'life' disruptions, such as those related to care work and caring. The respondents in this study highlight the 'care-less' (Grummell et al., 2009) nature of academic careers. The emotional dynamics of negotiating maternity leave personally and institutionally are sharply evident in the women's narratives.

A key finding of the research in this particular university context is that maternity leave and flexible working arrangements are too often governed by informal attitudes rather than institutional practices that support women to avail of such provisions without a career penalty resulting. The imperative of minimization of disruption to the institution and/or local unit was reflected in the women's narratives in our study, including in the responsibility placed on them as well as their local heads/managers to ensure this. There were many responses from the women in our survey (conducted 30 years after Byrne & Keher Dillon, 1996) which were illustrative of the informal arrangements that women made in relation to maternity leave. As in Byrne & Keher Dillon's (1996, p. 19) study,

> informal arrangements were defined more in response to the nature of Departmental/Section needs and of the reaction of colleagues than in terms of the individual needs of the woman taking leave.

It is clear that women who take maternity leave have to make choices or accommodations regarding workloads in order to fulfil all their functions and roles, both public and private. What also emerges in our research is that these 'choices' are often experienced as deeply felt dilemmas that entail inevitable costs. The real impact is that they effectively require women to work harder to keep pace within a linear, competitive career track and to strategize for career advancement in an institutional environment where structures do not adequately accommodate gaps for significant life events such as childbirth and post-maternity care and where there is little or no recognition of the disproportionate effects of career breaks on women. This is the case even where support is forthcoming and circumstances appear benign. Thus, the informality surrounding maternity leave can be viewed as a structural mechanism through which gendered outcomes are reproduced in contemporary academia.

In particular, our study highlights the role of the politics of emotions in understanding how such informal arrangements come into being, are experienced and are maintained by women. The women who participated in our study widely reported their sense of felt disadvantage *because* they had children and *because* they were known to have taken maternity leave — both among close colleagues, line managers and within the wider institution. The data provide a unique insight into not just the hidden structural disadvantage the women experienced but the emotional toll in terms of vulnerability to stress, of taking maternity leave in the middle of an academic career. The informality of practices around maternity leave is integrally bound up with an affective environment that produces and relies upon emotions such as guilt, anxiety, gratitude, responsibility and fear as expressed by the study respondents. The hidden emotional fallout and emotional pressures at the centre of organizational cultural norms are vividly narrated in the data. The inequalities produced through the processes surrounding the taking of maternity leave in a 21st-century university are made visible here by privileging the women's own lived and felt experiences. Any policy-based or managerialist response to address the structural inequalities caused by maternity leave and pregnancy in Irish universities needs to acknowledge this finding. Consequently, the negativity experienced by pregnant women and the associated emotional toll and career disadvantage reported, might also perhaps be addressed.

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[1] Paternity leave may be taken within 26 weeks of the birth or adoption of a child, payable from the Social Insurance Fund. The current payment is €235 per week and there is no requirement for employers to supplement paternity leave (Daly & Rush, 2017, pp. 211–215).

[2] GENOVATE is a FP7-funded [under Science in Society SiS 2012. 2.1.1–1 programme] action-research project (2013–2017). GENOVATE operated across seven European partner institutions, which have different institutional and national contexts for gender equality. For more information, see: http://www.genovate.eu/

[3] See, for example, HEA (2016).

[4] Pseudonyms are used throughout.

[5] Since this survey was undertaken, maternity and adoptive leave policies have been implemented by some research schemes including, for example, Science Foundation Ireland (SFI).

[6] Since this research was conducted, some universities in Ireland have introduced back-to-work grants for women returning from maternity leave, as part of their Athena SWAN action plans.

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