

Lack of ambition or lack of support? Diverging career experiences of men and women explain the persistence of gender bias

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Abstract

In this study we explore possible causes for the differential career success of women in academia. We do this by testing the content of organizational narratives about plausible reasons why women are less likely than men to advance in their academic careers, against the self-reported experiences and career choices of women and men in the organization. We compared content-coded narratives ($N = 84$) with quantitative self-report ($N = 661$) data. Both data sets were collected around the same time, taking care that different members of the organization contributed to each of these two data sources. First, we report the qualitative data (Study 1). These revealed the organizational narrative about gender differences in academic careers. On the one hand, people in the university acknowledged the sexist treatment of women, but on the other hand, they failed to note that this “chilly climate” might adversely impact the careers of women in the organization. We report the quantitative data in Study 2. This revealed no support for the validity of this narrative, which maintains the pervasive belief that women are less interested in, and prefer to “opt out” from, an academic career. Notably, we found no actual differences between female and male academics in their self-reported motivations. However, women did report having made more difficult life choices and having received less support from the organization for their careers. Together, these findings reveal blind spots in organizational narratives and point to additional measures that can be taken to ensure equal career opportunities for all employees.

1 | WOMEN IN ACADEMIA: THE LEAKY PIPELINE

Gender diversity is known to benefit creativity and innovation, which are essential to high performance in many work settings, including the academic work context examined here (Nielsen et al., 2017; Peterson

Institute for International Economics, 2016; Rhode & Packel, 2014). Yet, statistics show that women continue to be underrepresented, especially at higher career levels in companies and universities (European Commission, 2018b). The proportion of female students graduating from universities now exceeds that of male students and remains high among PhD students. Yet, women disproportionately often drop out in

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the most competitive stages of the academic career (in view of limited opportunities to obtain tenure or promotion), leading to a loss of know-how, qualifications, and diversity in science (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2015; She Figures, 2021). This has informed a variety of efforts to achieve more equal gender representation in academia (European Commission, 2018a).

Diverging career paths between genders are often attributed to unequal sharing of family responsibilities (Williams & Ceci, 2012) lowers women's ambitions at work, and guides the life choices they make. Women are seen to "opt out" from academia, leading to provisions to facilitate the combination of work with family roles. However, researchers have also documented the "chilly climate" women often encounter in academia (Biggs et al., 2018; Britton, 2017; Burke, 2017; Kuchynka et al., 2018). This can prevent women's advancement, regardless of their family status, and despite their professional ambitions and organizational provisions available to them. In fact, experiments have revealed that men and women expect and perceive female scientists to be less talented and creative than male scientists, even when their performance is identical (Leslie et al., 2015). Further, it has been established that when men become fathers this does not impact their perceived career motivation, while women are expected to reduce their career ambitions once they become mothers (Cuddy et al., 2004). This illustrates how social roles typically assumed by men and women inform expectations about the preferences and life choices made by individual men and women (Eagly et al., 2000). This is not without consequence. Stereotypical role expectations can cause the organization to extend less support for the career development of women. In fact, it has been demonstrated that such differential treatment of women who start a family, influences their turnover decisions (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019). These biased judgments of achievements, motivation, and potential that stem from generalized gender stereotypes and influence actual career choices, are typically shared by men as well as women (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012).

Based on prior research reviewed above, we argue that organizational narratives—conveying assumptions of work-family incompatibilities and perceived lack of ambition among women—may reflect gender stereotypes rather than stemming from actual gender differences in career motivation. Nevertheless, these narratives and the stereotypical views of social roles these convey may impact on the amount of encouragement and support received by men and women in the organization. Over time, this results in diverging career experiences. We argue that these different experiences are just as likely to influence the career progress of women compared to men, as an actual lack of interest and career motivation among women.

Decision-makers and researchers devoted to the advancement of gender equality might therefore not wish to rely on existing narratives and common perceptions to develop their policies. They might rather prefer to gain insight into the actual career experiences and ambitions of men and women at different career stages. Our current aim is to separate these potential explanations and better understand the interplay between the two, as a way to assess what

the organization can do to offer equal career opportunities to male and female academics. To achieve this goal, we set out to determine whether and how organizational narratives and perceptions (which we report in Study 1) map on to and align with actual motives and career experiences reported by male and female academics at different career stages in the organization (which we address in Study 2).

2 | GENDER BIAS AND JUST-WORLD BELIEFS

Research suggests that women receive less support than men in the course of their career, even in the presence of work-family programs (Krivkovich et al., 2017). The same teaching or research performance is valued differently, depending on the gender of the researcher (Mitchell & Martin, 2018; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Wagner et al., 2016). After correcting for valid indicators of achievement and merit, across the board female scholars receive lower teaching evaluations, research funds and honors, prestigious academic assignments and career options, and pay levels than their male colleagues (Bendels et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2014; Lee & Ellemers, 2015; Ma et al., 2019; Mengel et al., 2019; Sarsons, 2017; Treviño et al., 2018).

These outcomes are in conflict with people's just world beliefs, which lead them to deny the existence of such biases, even when research evidence of gender bias is presented (Barreto & Ellemers, 2015; Ellemers & Barreto, 2008; Faniko et al., 2015; Handley et al., 2015; for review). Women who have achieved a position of seniority implicitly convey this too: their success shows that it is not impossible for women to advance, supporting individual merit ideologies (Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010; Faniko et al., 2021). However, successful women tend to see themselves as very different from other women: women in senior organizational roles typically refer to personal sacrifices they made to succeed in their career and emphasize their exceptional competitiveness and ambition (Faniko et al., 2016, 2017, 2021). This makes them less attractive as role models and reinforces the notion that success is difficult to achieve for "typical" women (Asgari et al., 2012). At the same time, the reliance on just-world beliefs may feed organizational narratives and perceptions that any gender differences in career success should be ascribed to "something about women," such as their work-family issues, or lesser ambitions, rather than stemming from "something about the organization" (Faniko et al., 2021).

3 | THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Statistics clearly show that in academia women are less successful than men (European Research Council, 2016). At the same time, the presence of work/family programs explicitly communicates the commitment of academic organizations to promote gender equality. Many of these programs locate a main cause of differential career paths of men and women in individual preferences and ambitions

relating to biological differences and family roles as “facts of life,” that women in particular need to overcome (LERU position paper, 2019). But how does this relate to evidence suggesting that the academic contributions women make are implicitly devalued?

We consider the possibility that organizational narratives which emphasize work/family responsibilities of women as undermining their academic ambitions and career choices may feed just world beliefs. To the extent that such narratives fail to acknowledge the impact of organizational factors, such as implicit biases and lack of support, they may contribute to the maintenance of unequal career opportunities for women. Examining what the focus of these narratives is and whether this matches the actual experiences and reported ambitions of men and women, will help understand the interplay between organizational measures and personal career choices. Such knowledge will benefit organizations that aim to achieve more gender equality.

4 | THE CURRENT RESEARCH

To better guide organizational policies aiming to enhance the career success of women in academia, we examined the organizational narratives about factors relevant for the differential career success of men and women, and tested these against self-reported ambitions and career experiences of male and female researchers at different career stages.

We examined this in two data sets, conducted in a large European university that has an active diversity office promoting gender equality. We first report the qualitative data as Study 1. Here we examined how other employees in the organization perceive and explain the careers success of men and women in their institution. We report the quantitative data on self-stated ambitions, and career experiences (organizational support, career-related choices, and perceived sexism of men and women at different career stages) as Study 2. We hypothesize that it is relevant to assess whether there may be a mismatch between externally perceived barriers to women's careers (organizational narratives, Study 1) and actual career experiences of men and women (quantitative self-reports, Study 2). If this is the case, reliance on organizational narratives instead of self-reported experiences of men and women might prevent university organizations from taking appropriate actions.

5 | STUDY 1

In Study 1 we examined organizational narratives by asking a sample of academics in the organization to indicate which reasons they perceive for the differential career progress between men and women. Specifically, we were interested in assessing whether these narratives acknowledge the possibility that women experience differential treatment at work, and whether interviewees recognize this as a plausible reason for differential career success of men and women in the organization. To achieve these aims, in a series of

interviews, we first asked respondents to explain why women drop out at more advanced stages of the academic career, and subsequently to report whether they had experienced or perceived differential treatment of men and women in the academic workplace.

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

Ninety academic staff members, employed at nine different faculties and interfaculty institutions of a European university, were selected from the homepages of all academic departments. The main criteria for selecting the sample of interviewees were gender and career stage at the university for each faculty. Given our aim to examine possible difficulties that characterize the academic careers of women, we approached more women ($N = 60$) than men ($N = 30$). The selected academic staff members were e-mailed by the first author and asked to be interviewed for a study on academic careers. One individual refused to participate in this study and four others did not respond to the invitation. The data from one interview conducted with a female participant were not correctly saved, and thus excluded from further analysis.

A final sample of interviews from 84 participants (56 women and 28 men) was retained for further analyses. Of our respondents 24 were *junior* (18 female and 6 male PhD candidates, which are typically employed as junior researchers at European universities), 30 were *medior* (19 women and 11 men in non-tenure-track positions, namely postdocs, senior research, and teaching assistants, parttime lecturers, and assistant professors) and 30 were *senior academics* (19 women and 11 men in tenured associate, senior lecturer, or full professorship positions). This matches the way these groups of employees are designated according to their career stage by the HR department of the university. In selecting interviewees we took care to make sure that participants represented a wide range of disciplines such as science and medicine (27, 33.3%), social sciences (25, 30.9%), humanities (15, 18.5%), law and economics (14, 17.4%). Of these interviewees, 38 participants (45.2%) declared being parents.

5.1.2 | Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted by the first author. The first part of the interview was dedicated to collecting personal information about the interviewee's personal and professional life. This was done to establish rapport with the interviewee and introduce the main goal of the interview. As agreed with the interviewees as part of their informed consent, we do not report this personal information here. In the second part of the interview, the interviewees were asked to focus on the leaky pipeline and invited to indicate what they saw as the main reasons for this state of affairs. Subsequently, interviewees were asked to recount their experiences with sexism at the university—if any.

5.2 | Interview data

5.2.1 | Thematic analyses

The method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to encode the interviews. This method is independent of theory and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To analyze the interviews, we followed procedures recommended in previous research (Moss-Racusin et al., 2015). First, the content analysis of 84 interviews identified which different responses were provided. Second, we regrouped different responses into categories. In a third step, an external evaluator (a male researcher coming from another discipline) was asked to match each response with the identified categories independently from the first categorization made by the authors.

5.2.2 | Quantitative analyses

After identifying the comment main categories and subcategories, evidence of each main category was marked by a dummy variable as either present (1) or absent (0).

In a first step, we calculated the percentage of people who made such a comment for each main category. The percentages within each main category (e.g., Work-life balance challenges, 73%) refer to the ratio of the number of interviewees (62 individuals that mentioned at least one reason within the (sub-) category compared to the total number of interviewees (84). As categories were not mutually exclusive, the total number of responses attributed to each main category adds up to more than 100%.

In a second step, we tested whether the identified categories contained a meaningful percentage. To do this, we constructed a 95% confidence interval around the percentage of responses for each category using the Jeffreys interval (Brown et al., 2001) which is recommended when categories contain a small percentage of responses. As Table 1 shows, all four categories we identified contained a meaningful percentage (because the lower bound of each confidence interval exceeded zero; see Table S1).

In a third step, we computed the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test to compare whether the categories differed in magnitude from each other. This nonparametric test produces a z-score allowing us to determine whether category frequencies differed significantly from one another.

Finally, we explored possible gender differences in categories of explanations that emerged using Chi-square tests.

5.3 | Results

5.3.1 | What do people cite as reasons for difficult career advancement of women in academia?

In the examination of spontaneous responses provided to explain the difficult career advancement of women in academia, we distinguished

four categories of possible explanations (see Tables 1 and S1–S3). All interviewees indicated at least one reason to explain the high dropout rate of women during the academic career; the categories were not mutually exclusive.

Reason 1: Work-life balance challenges. The largest category of reasons cited (62 interviewees: 73% of the total sample, confidence interval [CI] [0.63%–0.82%]) referred to “facts of life” (work-life balance). That is, the interviewees mentioned difficulties women face in combining family and career, maternity as a setback to one's career, and negative impact of social expectations about women's careers as primary reasons for differential career advancement of women compared with men.

This category included comments such as “At post-doc level, women have their biological clocks to consider, they'll be thirty years old, they have to think about what they want and there are a lot of women who feel that they don't have the drive to have both a career and a child” [1- Interviewee's number]; “Having a child, that means fewer [published] papers and for a career, when you aren't tenured [...] that all has an impact. Most of my “intermediate-level” male colleagues are new parents, at least lots of them are. But most of my “intermediate-level” female colleagues, they don't have children. [2]” Along the same lines: “I think it is much more difficult for women to have a career in academia. Pregnancy has clearly been a problem for them. [3]”. (see Table S3 for interview's gender and position.)

Reason 2: Women's lack of confidence and ambition. The second-largest category of explanations contained responses of 46 interviewees (54% of the total panel, CI [0.44%–0.65%]) referring to women's lack of confidence and ambition. According to these explanations, women as a group are not sufficiently self-confident: “I always have to tell the girls, “You are fine, you are doing very well, and you will manage.” I always have to put the brakes on for the men, “Wait, that isn't right at all. Even though you may think so, you are not the next Einstein.” A woman says, “No, I am not smart enough to write a thesis” but the men say, “I am such a genius, my supervising professor is lucky to have a student as smart as me. [5]” This category also included comments implying that women are generally less ambitious and less interested in an academic career or that they prefer to focus on their children or husband's career rather than their own career: “Girls who were brilliant with really good CVs who decided from one day to the next to have children. Among others, there was one colleague who was completely dedicated to science and who suddenly decided to give up her career to focus entirely on her husband's career and children. [6]”; “She is dropping out of the race to let her husband advance” [8]. Another interviewee argued that women are less involved in professional networking than men are: “Women know how to network with other mothers at school, decide which mom will pick up the kids on which day, but they don't know how to network with their colleagues.” [9]

TABLE 1 Content analysis of the perceived reasons for difficult career advancement of women in academia (Study 1).

	N of respondents	% of respondent	95% Confidence interval of the difference		Wilcoxon signed-rank tests		
			Lower	Upper	1	2	3
1. Work-life balance challenges	62	73%	0.63	0.82			
For women is more difficult than for men to combine professional life with family life	41						
Maternity as a setback to personal career	25						
Social expectations based on gender roles impede women's career	8						
2. Women's lack of confidence and ambition	46	54%	0.44	0.65	-2.67, <i>p</i> = .005		
Women are less self-confident and less determined than men	27						
Women are less interested in academic career	15						
Women prioritize children over career	12						
Women prioritize their husband's career over their career	8						
Women are not good networkers for the professional issues	3						
3. Denial of gender issues	34	40%	0.3	0.51	-4.32, <i>p</i> < .001	-1.89, <i>p</i> = .06	
<i>It's not a gender issue:</i>							
A very limited number of academic positions in Switzerland	16						
Academic career is very demanding and competitive for both women and men	18						
Switzerland does not provide enough support to combine family life with professional life	5						
4. Sexism and lack of organizational support	28	33%	0.24	0.44	-4.63, <i>p</i> < .001	-2.77, <i>p</i> < .01	-0.86, <i>p</i> = .39
Sexist environment	13						
Male supervisors favor men over women	12						
The lack of female role models/or not inspiring female models	7						

Note: The answers provided were classified into four different categories. If an interviewee indicated multiple reasons, they were attributed to all relevant categories and sub-categories. The number of responses in each category (e.g., 62, 46, 34, and 28) refers to the number of interviewees that indicated at least one reason within this category. Since some interviewees gave different explanations relating to different sub-categories within one category, the total number of responses labeled to the sub-categories exceeds the total number of responses within one category. The percentages within each category refer to the ratio between the number of interviewees that mentioned at least one reason within the (sub-) category and the total number of participants (N = 84).

Reason 3: Denial of gender issues. Next, the third-largest category of explanations contained responses of 34 interviewees (39%, of the total panel CI [0.30%–0.51%]). Specifically, these comments explicitly mentioned that the high dropout rate of women in academia is *not* related to gender, insisting that both women and men encounter similar difficulties in their academic career. These responses referred to a very low number of academic positions in Switzerland as well as the level of precariousness and uncertainty that characterizes careers in academia: “I get the feeling that nowadays, the issue of a stable academic career is no longer a gender issue because our male colleagues are in the same boat, face the same uncertainty with temporary contracts.” [10] “Men leave too, it is not just that there aren't any women, [...] there is too much competition” [11].

Reason 4: Sexism and lack of organizational support. The smallest category of explanations contained the responses of 28 interviewees (33% of the total panel, CI [0.24%–0.44%]) and referred to perceived sexism in academia, the perception that men favor men over women, and to the lack of female role models. For example, “This university is a macho environment. There is no place for women” [13]; “I think that there are already a lot of male professors who are... not misogynistic, but almost. There is still a good share of men who don't want a woman around [16].” A female professor noted the negative impact of female role models in academia: “We have a lot of brilliant female students who finish excellent PhDs and then look at us and say, “We don't want your life, it is too much. You are constantly juggling your family, your husband, your kids, your work. It is too much, it is crazy, and we feel like it is the only option.” So they stop. [17]”

Do women and men differ in the reasons they cite for difficult career advancement of women in academia? We conducted a Chi-square test to examine percentage differences in categories of explanations women and men mentioned. As Table 2 in Supplemental Materials indicates, both female and male respondents referred to work-life balance challenges most frequently and sexism and/or lack of organizational support least often. However, the proportion of women citing women's lack of confidence and ambition was

significantly higher (61% than the proportion of men referring to such explanations (39%, $\chi^2(1, N = 46) = 4.06, p = .04$).

These results show that differential career experiences of women and men are only mentioned by a minority of interviewees. Instead, most of the reasons cited to explain the leaky pipeline phenomenon either refer to work/family incompatibility or attributes the lack of career success to women's inherent lack of ambition and confidence. Such references to reasons that match the stereotypical social roles of women are more often made by women than men, which is consistent with previous findings (Derks, Ellemers, et al., 2011; Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2016; Ellemers, 2014; Ellemers et al., 2012; Faniko et al., 2016, 2017).

Prior studies have documented that the tendency for successful women to endorse stereotypical views of “other women” (while emphasizing their own ambition and work dedication) stems from their need to cope with a work environment that underestimates the competence and ambition of women as a group. Successful women can't simply assume other women at work will be just like them, because they have found that signaling of additional motivation-sometimes at great personal cost- is needed to overcome lack of support for women in the workplace (Ellemers et al., 2012; Faniko et al., 2017). Nevertheless, such obstacles are generally not acknowledged. Indeed, the interview data we collected reveal that the possibility that women are less likely to progress in their career due to the experience of sexist treatment at work is only mentioned by a small number of interviewees.

5.3.2 | Do people perceive sexism at the university?

To assess whether respondents perceived any evidence of sexism at university, interviewees were explicitly asked whether they had experienced or perceived differential treatment of men and women in the academia (see Tables 4-5). A large majority of interviewees (71%)—reported various experiences of sexism, which included behaviors indicating hostile as well as benevolent sexism. For instance, many interviewees reported that their supervisor refer to them or their female colleagues as “baby,” “beauty,” “honey,” or “sweetheart,” instead of using their name. The majority of reported

TABLE 2 Content analysis of the experienced or perceived sexism in the academic workplace (Study 1).

	N of respondents	% of respondents	95% Confidence interval of the difference		Wilcoxon signed-rank tests		
			Lower	Upper	1	2	3
1. Reported different experiences of sexism targeting women	60	71%	0.61	0.80	-4.76, $p < .001$		
2. Denied sexism	18	21%	0.14	0.31			
3. Mixed experience	3	4%	0.01	0.09	-7.18, $p < .001$	-3.27, $p < .001$	
4. No opinion	3	4%	0.01	0.09	-7.18, $p < .001$	-3.27, $p < .001$	0.00, $p = 1.00$

experiences indicated quite blatant sexism, communicating hostility towards women and a belief in women's inferior competence compared to men. This was expressed for instance as follows: "I have heard a professor who is now retired say "The female assistants, we used to use them as typists, but now they want to get PhDs" [24]. Likewise, a female professor mentioned "The worst I saw was in a selection committee. There was at least one man and one woman who were well suited and maybe one other applicant, and so one of the committee members said, "For the first, I have this to say; for the second, this; and on the third, the woman, I have nothing to say." I think that is the most sexist thing I have heard, I thought it was very revealing that he had nothing to say. [25]" Another interviewee invoked other experiences "When I told my boss that I was going to apply for a new position, he knew some of the people on the selection committee, including one of the men. He told me "Don't forget to wear a skirt for your interview. [23]" These testimonies suggest that different forms of benevolent and hostile sexism do occur and are recognized as such, even if they are not mentioned spontaneously as relevant reasons for differential career success of men and women.

5.3.3 | Do women and men differ in the way they perceive sexism at the university?

We conducted a Chi-square test to examine whether women and men perceived similar levels of sexism at the university. Women (80%) recognized more often than men (54%) that sexism is expressed at the university, $\chi^2(1, N = 60 = 6.56, p = .005$ (see Table S4).

5.4 | Discussion

The findings of Study 1 reveal paradoxical information concerning the "leaky pipeline" of women's careers in academia. When asked about the reasons why so many women drop out from an academic career, the organizational narratives point to two main causes that closely reflect common gender stereotypes: first, the obstacles related to the work-family balance, and second an allegedly endemic lack of career motivation of women. These narratives support just world beliefs, locating the differential career success in the lives and choices of women, not in some form of differential treatment by the organization. However, when explicitly asked about the presence of sexist behaviors in the university the actual incidence of observing differential treatment towards male and female academics turns out to be very high, and is acknowledged by the vast majority of women interviewed. At the same time, this is rarely spontaneously mentioned or recognized as a factor that might be relevant to the motivation or estimated success chances of women pursuing an academic career. Thus on the one hand, most members of the academic community perceive and acknowledge the presence of sexist behaviors in their organization. Yet, on the other hand, they fail to recognize that this organizational phenomenon might be relevant to explain the differential career success of women in the organization. In Study 2 we test these organizational narratives against

the actual motivation and career experiences reported by male and female academics at different career stages in the organization.

6 | STUDY 2

Study 2 examined a separate sample of faculty members from the same university. This study was conducted to assess whether there actually are differences between women and men in the organization (a) in the career ambitions they report and (b) in the support they receive from others in the work environment. To this end, we compare responses of female and male researchers at different career stages (junior, mediator, and senior), to investigate whether women, compared to men indicate that they are less motivated to advance in their career. Further, we examine the level of support experienced by women and men at different career stages, and their perceptions of sexism in their academic workplace.

6.1 | Method

6.1.1 | Participants

The final sample for this study consisted of 661 participants, all academic staff members of the same large European university that we sampled for Study 1. Following the same guideline to distinguish between different career stages, the sample contained 248 *juniors* (166 women and 82 men in PhD positions), 202 *mediators* (120 women and 82 men in nontenured post PhD lecturing or research positions) and 211 *seniors* (85 women and 126 men in tenured lecturing and professorship positions) in lecturing and professorship positions (age range 23 to 68, $M = 37.98, SD = 10.65$). We took care that this sample did not overlap with the sample examined in Study 1. The participants came from a wide range of disciplines such as science and medicine (239, 48.3%), social sciences (112, 22.6%), humanities (94, 19%), law, and economics (50, 10.1%). Most of the participants declared having a nationality from Western Europe (500, 80%)¹. A small percentage declared having a nationality from Southern Europe (58, 9.3%), Eastern Europe (24, 3.8%), America (Northern America 16, 2.6%; Southern America (6, 1%), Asia (8, 1.3%), and Africa (4, 0.6%). 36 participants did not declare their nationality. 279 participants (42.2%) declared being parents². They were contacted by the first author of the manuscript and were asked to participate in a survey on academic careers (see Supporting Information, Study 2, Participants).

6.1.2 | Measures

The measures for this study were developed on the basis of information gathered from the (initial) interviews conducted in the context of this study. This allows us to check the organizational narratives captured in Study 1 against the actual career experiences reported by men and women in the organization.

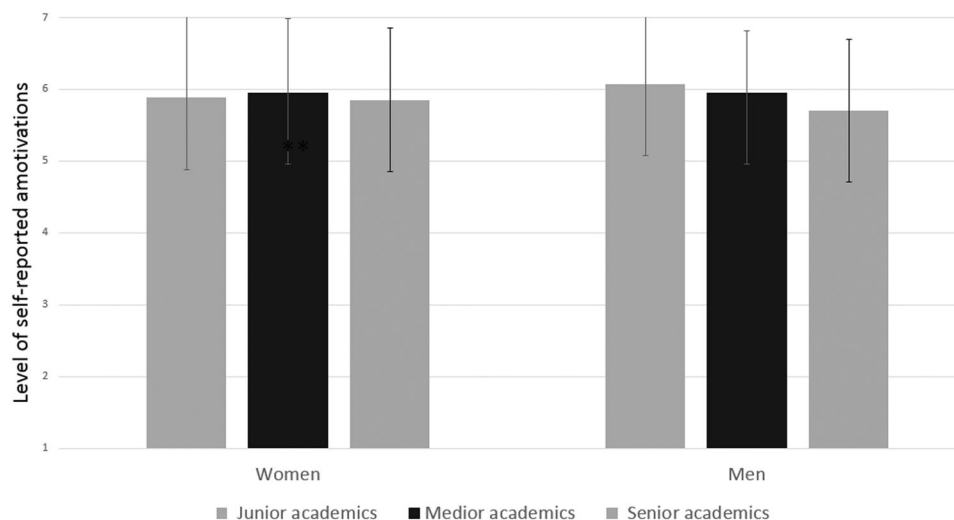


FIGURE 1 Self-reported motivation for career success as predicted by participant's gender and career stage (Study 2).

6.1.3 | Motivation for career success

We measured motivation for career success with four items ($\alpha = .70$) such as “I am motivated to develop my academic and professional network”. *Organizational support*. On a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly), participants indicated their agreement with four statements ($\alpha = .67$) we developed to assess organizational support, such as “My immediate superior does/did not take my career seriously enough” (reverse coded; see Supporting Information for all items used, Study 2, Measures). Higher scores indicate greater perceived support.

6.1.4 | Career-related choices

The difficult choices participants had made in different domains (family, vacation, personal convictions to achieve career success) to benefit their career were assessed with seven items ($\alpha = .73$), such as “I have changed my decision to have children, or when to have children, based on the demands of my career”. Higher scores indicate more prioritization of one's career at the expense of other life domains.

Perceived sexism in the academic workplace. We developed a measure of five items ($\alpha = .80$) to assess perceptions of sexism against women at the academic workplace, such as “I sometimes hear sexist jokes about the abilities of women.”

6.2 | Results

6.2.1 | Do women and men report the same career motivations?

We ran a 2 (Participant Gender: women vs. men) \times 3 (Career Stage: junior vs. medior vs senior) analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare

the self-reported career motivation of women and men at different career stages. Results showed no significant difference between women and men in self-reported career ambition, or between participants at different career stages, (respectively, $F(1, 648) = 0.02, p = .89, \eta^2_p = .00$; $F(1, 648) = 2.15, p = .12, \eta^2_p = .01$). No significant interaction was observed, $F(1, 648) = 1.26, p = .29, \eta^2_p = .01$ (see Figure 1).

6.2.2 | Do women and men have the same career experiences?

A MANOVA was conducted to compare perceived organizational support and career-related choices made by women and men at different career stages as relevant indicators of their career experiences. We included both measures in a MANOVA to guard against capitalization on chance (inflated Type 1 error rate with multiple ANOVA's for variables that are likely to correlate). We only examined univariate effects after having established significance at the multivariate level. The overall MANOVA revealed a multivariate significant main effect of participant's gender, participant's career stage, and a significant multivariate interaction between these variables (respectively, $F(2, 655) = 13.09, p < .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .96, \eta^2_p = .04$; $F(4, 655) = 8.18, p < .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .95, \eta^2_p = .03$; $F(4, 655) = 4.71, p = .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .97, \eta^2_p = .01$). Significant univariate tests revealed that women reported less organizational support and indicated having made more difficult life choices for career success than men (respectively, $F(1, 655) = 11.29, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .02$; $F(1, 655) = 21.41, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .03$). Additionally, a significant interaction between participant's gender and career stage was observed for both variables, (respectively, $F(2, 665) = 8.39, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .03$; $F(2, 655) = 3.13, p = .04, \eta^2_p = .01$ (see Figure 2).

The decomposition of the interaction showed that senior women reported receiving less support and having made more difficult choices for career success, compared to senior men (both $p < .001$), whereas no significant difference was observed between women and men at junior

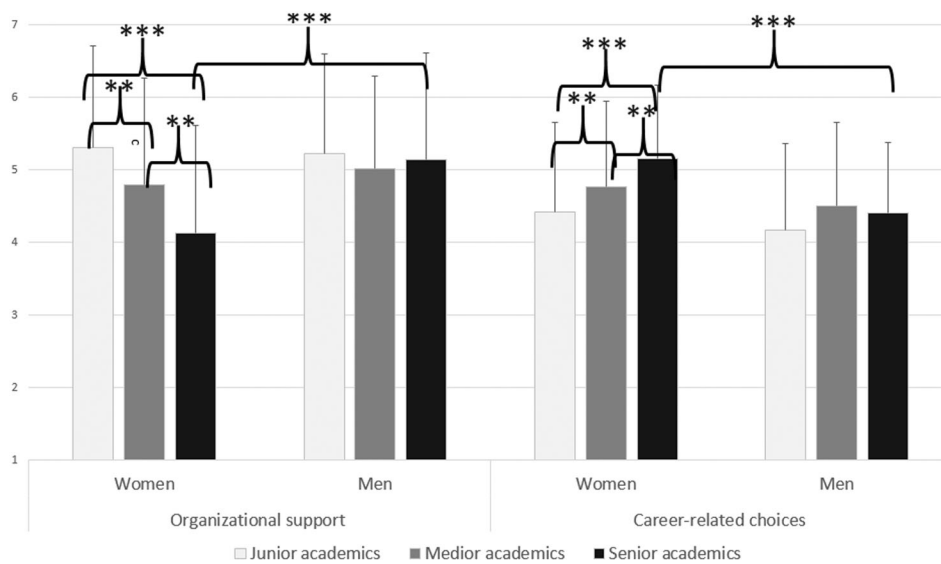


FIGURE 2 Reported organizational support and career-related choices as predicted by participant's gender and career stage (Study 2). The accolades indicate significant differences between means: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

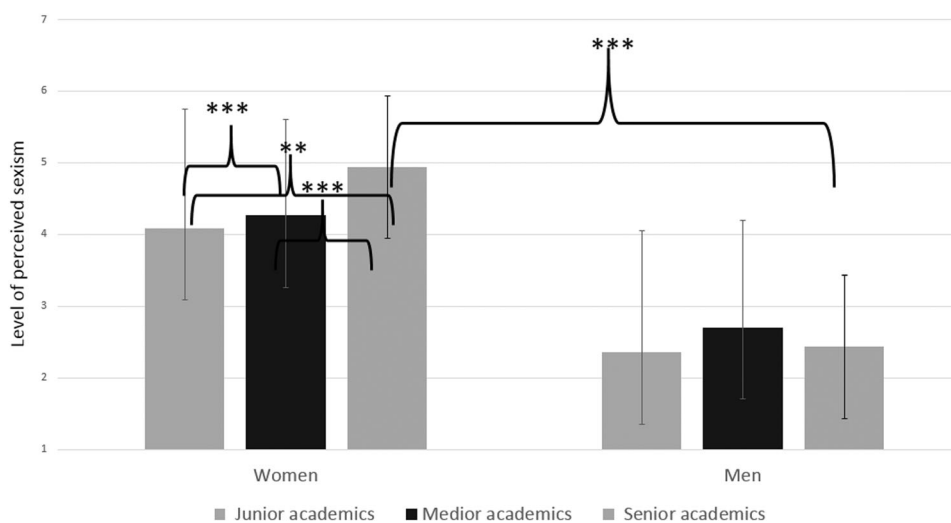


FIGURE 3 Perceived sexist treatment at the academic workplace as predicted by participant's gender and career stage (Study 2). The accolades indicate significant differences between means: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

and medior levels in this respect. Finally, senior women reported having received less organizational support and having made more sacrifices for career success than junior and medior women (both $ps < .001$). For men, the level of reported organizational support and career-related difficult choices made was not predicted by their career stage (both ps ns).

6.2.3 | Do women and men perceive sexism at the academic workplace?

We performed an ANOVA to examine the extent to which women and men at different career stages perceived sexism within the university. Overall, compared to men, women perceived more sexism, $F(1, 655) = 247.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .27$. This also depended on participant's career

stage, $F(2, 655) = 4.93$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. A significant interaction between these two variables, $F(2, 665) = 5.52$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, showed that compared to junior and medior women, senior women were more inclined to report incidence of sexism (both $ps = .002$), while for men, perceived sexism was not predicted by their career stage (both ps ns, see Figure 3).

6.2.4 | Is there a relation between perceived sexism and individual career experiences?

Finally, we examined the intercorrelations between the different variables (separately for women and men), to explore the relation between perceived sexism in the organization on the one hand, and

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between variables (Study 2; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$).

Women					
	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Motivation for career success	5.90	1.11	1		
2. Organizational support	4.87	1.51	-.09	1	
3. Career-related choices	4.70	1.20	.27***	-.36***	1
4. Perceived sexism in the academic workplace	4.34	1.65	-.03	-.42***	.34***
Men					
	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Motivation for career success	5.88	1.05	1		
2. Organizational support	5.13	1.39	.00	1	
3. Career-related choices	4.37	1.09	.17**	-.22**	1
4. Perceived sexism in the academic workplace	2.49	1.39	-.09	-.14*	.03

Abbreviation: SD, standard deviation.

organizational support, and career-related choices as relevant individual career experiences on the other hand (see Table 3). These results indicate a significant positive correlation between perceived sexism and career-related choices for women ($0.34, p < .001$), but not for men ($-0.03, p$ ns), supporting the notion that the perception of sexism in the organization relates to the career choices that women make. Further, we observe a significant negative correlation between perceived sexism and organizational support for women ($-0.42, p < .001$) and to a lesser degree for men ($-0.14, p = .02$). Finally, we find a significant negative correlation between organizational support and career-related choices for women ($-0.36, p < .001$) as well as men ($-0.22, p < .001$).

6.3 | Discussion

Study 2 established, first, that women and men reported similar levels of ambition at all career stages. This refutes the pervasive belief that women as a group are less interested in, and prefer to “opt out” from, an academic career. Second, this study indicates that the career experiences of men and women are different, due to their differential treatment in the organization. This characterizes the “chilly climate” faced by women in academia as they attempt to advance in their career. That is, senior women reported having received less organizational support, and indicated having made more difficult choices for career success than their male counterparts. Likewise, women, especially senior women, perceived more sexism at the university than men did. The correlational analyses further revealed that perceptions of sexism in the organization relate to the organizational support women experience as well as the career-choices they make. Finally, we observe that most female respondents declared having made personal sacrifices to be successful in their career—including in terms of work-family balance, and

this tendency was more pronounced for women at more advanced career stages. Thus, these data reveal an equal level of motivation and ambition among male and female respondents but career choices of women relating to different levels of experienced support and sexism in the organization. Together, this suggests that women who wish to advance in their career feel more compelled than men to make personal sacrifices in prioritizing their career above other life domains.

The correlational analyses further suggest that as the organization exhibits more sexism it not only offers less support to women, but also is less supportive of men. For both men and women, a perceived lack of organizational support makes them feel more compelled to sacrifice other life domains to prioritize their career advancement. This is an important conclusion as it might suggest that doing something ‘for’ women in the organization does not necessarily go ‘against’ the interests of men. In fact, it seems very likely that a more supportive and less sexist work environment could benefit women as well as men who aim to reconcile their career ambitions with their personal lives.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The two data sets reported here aimed to examine different possible factors that might prevent women from succeeding in an academic career. While a majority of university graduates are women, an overwhelming majority of senior faculty are men. We set out to examine why female academics are more likely to drop out and less likely to advance in their career than men. We note that policies aiming to correct this imbalance often seem to reflect gender stereotypes and traditional role relations. These policies typically focus on supporting women in combining work and family responsibilities, and advertise role models that might feed their professional ambition. The present research points to additional concerns that might play a role.

The first study reported here captures organizational narratives that document the “chilly climate” for women in academia. That is, these narratives locate the main reasons for differential career success in specific characteristics of women, instead of acknowledging the additional hurdles women might have to overcome in the work environment they encounter. That is, interviewees were most likely to cite work-family issues and lack of confidence and ambition of women as important barriers for women's academic career. Notably, nearly three out of four respondents can provide observations of sexist treatment of women when prompted to do so. However, this is only recognized as a relevant factor in the career advancement of women by one-third of the respondents.

An important contribution of these data is that they document that the interviewees in Study 1 do observe and acknowledge sexist treatment of women on the one hand while on the other hand failing to see that this might be a factor that might discourage women or can diminish the career success of women in the organization. Instead, our respondents prefer to locate likely reasons for the differential career success of men and women in factors relating to traditional social roles and the female stereotype.

That is, people seem to prefer explanations that are rooted in gender stereotypes linked to the role of a man as breadwinner and the woman as caregiver, which emphasize “agency” in men and “communality” in women (Ellemers, 2018). This is reflected in our participants’ reasoning that differential career success of women is most likely due to their family responsibilities (Williams & Ceci, 2012) which lowers women’s ambitions at work, and guides the life choices they make causing them to “opt out” of academia. We note that being confronted with a work environment that is hostile to women and lacking organizational support can offer an alternative explanations for the behaviors observed (‘suddenly’ deciding to leave, failing to establish successful network relations at work), and helps understand why so many women drop out of academic careers even if they have equal ability, ambitions, and motivation.

In support of this reasoning, the second study reveals no differences in the career motivation actually reported by female and male academics. In fact, our findings suggest that women may need to be even more motivated to be successful in their career than men are. That is, women in senior positions reported having made more difficult life choices for their career, at the same time as having received less support from the organization, and having experienced more sexism. Thus, we find no evidence that women are less ambitious or prefer to “opt out” from an academic career. However, we do see that the career experiences of men and women are different: women experience less support from their leaders and peers, they report having had to make more difficult choices to advance in their career, and are more likely to experience a hostile work environment characterized by sexist behaviors and comments. All these differences in the experiences of men and women turn out to be more pronounced at senior career levels, indicating that these senior women were successful despite the ‘chilly climate’ they encountered, instead of ‘opting out’.

Together these data lead us to conclude that the organizational narratives captured in Study 1, concerning the reasons women quit academia are more rooted in stereotypical expectations, than in the choices and behaviors men and women in the organization actually report. Recognizing sexist treatment and acknowledging that social exclusion at work might undermine the work motivation and success of women, would offer an alternative interpretation of the observations noted by our interviewees, for instance that women ‘suddenly’ decide to leave, or are less able to establish relevant networks in the workplace. Together, the results of these two studies document how the failure to acknowledge the persistence of sexist treatment can explain behavioral displays of women and constitute a major obstacle to the careers of female academics. On the one hand, in Study 1, women as well as men revealed a high propensity to denounce other members of their group, by failing to acknowledge organizational factors as impeding the career progress of women, while reporting an alleged lack of motivation among women as a more plausible cause. On the other hand, in Study 2, women were more likely than men to report actually having prioritized their career over other life domains, indicating a very high level of personal motivation. This pattern of results extends findings of prior studies (e.g. Faniko et al., 2021), that

reveal the tendency of women to see themselves as more different from ‘ordinary’ women as they advance in their career. The present data reveal that female academics may dissociate the awareness of their own motivation and career dedication from the way they interpret the behavior of women as a group in academia.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present research is characterized by several limitations that merit further investigation in future research. These relate to the generalizability of the current research to other academic organizations in other demographic and cultural contexts. First, we note that – in line with the HR policy of the university at the time that we conducted this study—participants were not explicitly invited to declare a nonbinary gender category. The questionnaire only presented two options for them to choose from: women and men. We acknowledge that this can result in gender misclassification (Cameron & Stinson, 2019). We do note that the comments solicited in free format, did not signal this as a shortcoming of the questionnaire in the eyes of the participants in our study.

Second, we acknowledge that not only sexism but also other implicit biases relating to nationality or ethnicity may contribute to unequal representation of different demographic groups in the academic workplace, especially in senior academic positions (Bourabain, 2020). However, our current sample and data did not allow us to further examine this issue, as the staff at this university is relatively homogeneous in terms of nationality/ethnicity. We did register participant nationality, but the numbers of faculty members representing different national groups was too small to statistically consider the impact of intersectionality in the present manuscript.

Third, future research might further examine the extent to which our findings contribute to the understanding of the factors influencing the differential career success of women and men across different academic contexts. The present data were collected in a large European University, ranked 46 of 547 according to the Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings for gender equality in 2020. Similar examinations carried out in other national contexts or in universities with higher or lower gender equality scores might shed further light on relevant moderators of the effects reported here.

9 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The fact that the proportion of women that is found among junior academics decreases as academics progress in their careers is generally seen as a problem that needs to be solved. To be able to take appropriate actions towards achieving this goal it is important to make sure that policy interventions target factors that actually relate to the differential career success of men and women. Our research indicates that current efforts focusing on work-family issues and

career choices of women (i.e., 'fix the women') will not be optimally effective as long as other issues relating to sexism and lack of support for women are not resolved and the organizational climate is not "fixed"). Making a career in science requires persistence, dedication, and ambition, resulting in difficult life choices—for men as well as for women—and our studies show that male and female academics at different life stages are ready to make these choices and possess such ambition. However, these ambitions will only be frustrated and wasted when the university organization is unable to offer a work environment that is equally welcoming and supportive of ambitious scholars, regardless of their gender. Closing our eyes to sexist treatment that persists, and instead continuing to place unilateral emphasis on women's but not men's "choice" to have a family as well as a career, is not the way to get there.

Thus, the results of these two studies have clear practical implications, as they point out at a weak point of many organizational policies. As a matter of fact, most policy interventions to support women's career reflect common narratives that rely on gender stereotypical thinking. Accordingly, such policies often focus on measures aiming to ease the work-family balance and enhance the self-confidence of women. At the same time, both these difficulties are located in the 'nature' of women as a group, and seen as rather unrelated to the functioning of the organization and their treatment by others in the organization. Our findings show that it may be worth considering additional measures targeting the "chilly climate" that characterizes the behaviors and interactions within the organizational environment. Increased awareness of how organizational level factors impact on individual career choices is needed to be able to change the way women are perceived by their—male and female—colleagues and superiors, and to promote the development of good practices that successfully identify, prevent, and address sexist behaviors within work teams and organizations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Klea Faniko designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and prepared a first draft of the paper. Naomi Ellemers helped design the study, analyzed the data, drafted the introduction to the paper, and revised the paper. Belle Derks helped design the study, analyzed the data, and revised the paper.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The largest group of participants originating from Western Europe consisted of Swiss (325, 65%), French (124, 24.8%), German (31, 6.2%), Belgian (10, 2%), Dutch (7, 1.4%), and Austrian (3, 6%) nationals.

² We checked for parenthood as a potentially confounding variable in Study 2, by including this as a covariate in the analyses of our dependent variables. These additional analyses reveal that the effects reported here remain the same after including parenthood status as a covariate.

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