

Rebuilding Academic Communities with Compassion and Collegiality: Challenging Neoliberalist Invisible Labour “Wife-Work”

Sarah Percy¹, Sarah Montano², Inci Toral², Lynn Gribble³

¹University of Birmingham, Dubai, UAE. ²University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom. ³University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

We bring together international academics to examine the concept of invisible* labour or so-called "wife-work" in academia, highlighting the invisible and emotional labour predominantly undertaken by female academics. We identified that neoliberalism has exacerbated this issue by valuing metrics, outputs and inequality over essential but non-promotable tasks. Using a feminist collaborative hackathon approach, we explore how these tasks, such as mentoring, committee work, and emotional support, are critical yet undervalued. Institutional theory through a neo-liberalistic lens is applied to understand how universities perpetuate traditional gender roles, leading to systemic biases contributing to service work literature and organisational discourse. It is only by challenging academic structures that we can rebuild our academic communities by emphasising the need for collegiality and compassion, so that tasks are shared and there is equitable recognition of women's contributions in academia.

** invisible and emotional labour can affect any academic of any gender*

Full paper

Introduction

As a group of academics who have faced challenges on the path to promotion, we identified that behind great success, lies an untold story of invisible labour (Percy et al. 2024). Within the current Higher Education Institution (HEI) system, this invisible and emotional work is often overlooked or undervalued, leading to a disproportionate burden of care, service work and collegial support, termed as “wife-work”. This paper focuses on the second stage of our research bringing together international academics via a

hackathon in three countries to collectively explore the concept of wife-work, to identify causes and present a call to action to compassionately challenge the traditional discourse (Cannizzo, 2018).

Challenging invisible labour

Academia is not unique in facing a gender pay gap, currently 11.9% (Kim et al. 2024; PWC 2024) compounded by only 28% of all professors being women (Stephenson 2023). The reasons for pay gaps and such biases are complex and multi-factorial (Westoby 2021). Our research contributes to understanding this persistent gap through our analysis of the “gender unequal distribution” of academic labour (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2024) including emotional labour tasks (Mann 1997) such as student support, mentoring or service work, often leading to emotional dissonance and burnout (Grandey 2013). Despite the critical role these tasks play in supporting institutions, they are seldom acknowledged in formal workloads or promotion pathways, becoming classified as “non-promotable tasks” (Babcock et al. 2022).

Drawing on institutional theory and theories of gendered organisations, our research explores how HEIs perpetuate traditional gender roles and expectations. Acker and Armenti’s (2004) work identified that inequality regimes result in discriminations across HEI’s (Benschop and van der Brink 2019), leading to systemic wife-work. There has been a shift from valuing work with students to valuing metrics and outputs (Acker and Armenti 2004). According to institutional theory, HEIs are embedded in social norms and values, shaping their structures and behaviours (Thornton et al. 2012). These norms often perpetuate traditional gender roles, leading to a gendered division of labour. Emotional labour and service tasks often go unrecognised in formal reward systems such as promotion and tenure (Crain et al. 2016).

Neoliberalism in HE, which is market driven, has contributed to a rewards system that undervalues wife-work (Monbiot 2016). Metrics and rankings become essential to signal quality to customers leading to reductions in service support (Burke 2020). Research suggests that student satisfaction measures, are biased against female academics, contributing to systemic issues within HE (Marques et al. 2024). Therefore, neoliberalism ignores systemic inequalities, disadvantaging women (Blackmore 2019). At the institutional level, neoliberalism focuses on efficiency, effectiveness and profitability (Dougherty and Natow 2020). With REF and funding pressures, HEIs prioritise tasks within this context, leading to agency related activities driven by institutional isomorphism, leaving non-promotable tasks to mainly women (Adler and Lalonde 2020). Challenging these systemic issues requires a fundamental shift in valuing and recognising all forms of labour equitably and bringing more collegiality to our academic communities (Montano et al. 2025).

An International Hackathon – collective exploration, compassionate solutions

Our research has two stages. In the first stage (see Percy et al. 2024), we used a feminist collaborative autoethnographic approach to explore invisible and emotional labour among female academics (Chang et al. 2016; Rutter et al. 2021), providing an in-depth examination of personal and shared experiences within our academic community (Akehurst and Scott 2023). In the second stage we used hackathons in three countries (UK, Dubai and Australia). Hackathons, once primarily for software developers, can foster shared understanding and initiate problem-solving when applied to complex issues (Rys 2023). A hackathon provides participants with the opportunity to collectively explore ideas, practices, and activities to tackle the issue of wife-work (Paul 2020). By fostering international community support, these hackathons aimed to facilitate change and foster equality, compassionately working towards rebuilding academic communities.

Conclusion - Rebuilding Communities with compassion and collegiality

We recognise that HEIs are under great pressure, specifically from neoliberal forces questioning the validity of HE degrees. However, we argue that HEIs cannot exist without non-promotable "wife-work", thus we need to recognise and value women's work within institutions. Whilst we stress that the real issue lies within organisational practices rather than women themselves, we can work together to rebuild academic communities centred on compassion and collegiality - we can challenge the existing discourse. With activism and challenge we can ensure equitable recognition and valuation of women's contributions within academia. Challenge and change start with awareness, so we hope this is a step in the right direction.