

# THE CONCERNS OF CANADIAN WOMEN ACADEMICS: WILL FACULTY SHORTAGES MAKE THINGS BETTER OR WORSE?

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this article is to apply a gender analysis to a predicted trend in Canadian academic life, the expected decline in faculty numbers over the coming decades as new faculty numbers do not keep pace with retirements of the baby-boom generation. The first section develops the notion of a gender analysis and gives a brief summary of my own research on Canadian women academics. The next section describes the “faculty shortage problem” and its likely impact on Canadian higher education. Then the two topics are brought together by questioning how the shortages might impact upon the concerns of women academics. Here I imagine three scenarios based on different ways governments and universities might respond to the issue. The article concludes with a consideration of what a gender analysis has told us about the predicted faculty shortage problem.

## LES INQUIÉTUDES DES FEMMES CANADIENNES POSSÉDANT DES DIPLÔMES UNIVERSITAIRES : LA PÉNURIE DANS LES FACULTÉS AMÉLIORERA-T-ELLE OU AGGRAVERA-T-ELLE LES CHOSES?

**RÉSUMÉ.** Le but de cet article est d'appliquer une analyse des questions de parité à une tendance prévue dans la vie universitaire, soit le déclin attendu dans les facultés au cours des prochaines décennies en raison des départs à la retraite de la génération des baby-boomers. La première section explore en détail l'idée d'une analyse des données en fonction du sexe et contient un bref sommaire de ma propre recherche sur les femmes universitaires canadiennes. La section suivante décrit le « problème de pénurie dans les facultés » et ses répercussions possibles sur l'enseignement supérieur au Canada. Les deux sujets sont ensuite réunis afin d'analyser de quelle façon la pénurie peut se répercuter sur les préoccupations des femmes universitaires. J'élabore trois scénarios fondés sur différentes solutions que peuvent envisager les gouvernements et les universités pour résoudre ce problème. Dans sa conclusion, l'article se concentre sur ce qu'une analyse des questions de parité nous renseigne sur la pénurie prévue dans les facultés.

There have been dire predictions of insufficient numbers of academics in Canada as the baby-boom generation who largely staff universities will come to retirement age in a decade or so, while not enough new doctorates are being prepared to take their place. At the same time issues of gender and race equity in appointments have been only partially addressed. The background paper for a conference on "The Faculty Shortage Crisis in Ontario Universities" (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2001), in its conclusion, notes that equity-seeking groups are still greatly under-represented in faculty ranks in Canada and that it is time for universities to "pursue hiring policies that are sensitive to the need for greater equity and diversity in their faculty complements." We are left to wonder, however, whether the faculty shortage situation that has been predicted will make matters better or worse for these groups, not only in terms of hiring but in working conditions as well. In this article, I take the opportunity to reflect on this question in the light of research I have been doing over the past eight years on women academics in Canada.

Details about Canadian academics are found throughout the article. It might be helpful at this juncture, however, to rehearse a few pertinent points. It is difficult to speak of "Canadian higher education," as control over education rests with the ten individual provinces and three territories, although the federal government has an important indirect role in providing funds to the provinces. Although Canadian universities resemble American ones in many ways – e.g., students generally attend for four years to get a bachelor's degree and participation rates are among the highest in the world – there are some important differences. The Canadian universities are nearly all public, while United States institutions are a mixture of public and private. United States universities are known for an extreme variation in quality and purpose that does not happen in Canada. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada claims that there are 93 "institutions of higher learning that make up the Canadian university community" (AUCC, 2002a, p. 1). This figure does not include community colleges (institutions that specialize in vocational training and do not generally give bachelor's degrees, although credits may be transferable in some provinces). The figure does count separately individual colleges affiliated with universities and some religious institutions. More usual ways of counting put the figure of "universities" at around 75 (Jones, 1997), with slightly under 35,000 faculty members (AUCC, 2002b, p. 21).

The main designations for faculty are assistant professor, associate professor and full professor. A new, "junior" academic on the so-called "tenure track" (in line for a permanent appointment) will begin at assistant professor rank, and will generally be promoted to associate professor at the point of receiving tenure. Some years later, an academic can apply to be considered for promotion to full professor. At each promotion stage, there is a full review

of the person's scholarship, teaching and service to the institution, usually involving external assessors. In addition, many universities have "merit" procedures whereby work is assessed by peers or department heads, usually on an annual basis, and there is a monetary award for degrees of "merit." In some cases, the amount is added to base salary, in others it is a one-time only bonus.

In examining hiring, work conditions and equity in Canadian universities, first, I consider the problems and possibilities involved in conducting research on women academics. Then I give a description of the "faculty shortage problem" and its predicted impact on Canadian higher education. Next, I bring the two topics together by speculating on how the shortages might impact upon the concerns of women academics. The article finishes with a conclusion that considers what a gender analysis has told us about the predicted faculty shortage problem.

### *Women academics and gender analysis*

With the spread of the women's movement, feminist scholarship, and popular feminist and anti-feminist tracts, there is now much greater awareness of the impact of gender on society than was the case 20 years ago (Acker, 1994). However, what seems to have seeped into the collective consciousness is the notion that women and men are different from one another. Even feminist research tends toward considering "women academics" as if they are homogeneous (and inevitably different from men), rather than a heterogeneous category containing women of many classes, races, ages and locations. Here, of course, we have a central contemporary dilemma of feminist scholarship. If, in order to avoid essentialist approaches, we abandon any attempt to generalize about women (or men), then we seem unable to talk about the way in which gender structures our institutions, which is for me still a crucial dimension of understanding social life (see also Crompton, 1999, p. 6).

What I would endorse, in studies of teachers, academics, administrators, parents, and many other topics within educational scholarship, is the adoption of a "gender analysis" (Acker, 1999c; Grumet, 1998). Adopting a gender analysis means being alert to gender-inflected dimensions of any topic under study. Gender, in sociological writing, is usually understood as a cultural rather than biological category, indeed one that shapes our notions of biology. It refers to culturally specific but changeable definitions of "masculine" and "feminine." A gender analysis of academics' work requires attention be paid to the obvious and subtle ways in which cultural beliefs about women and men influence the nature of what people do.

At a minimum, a distinction must be made between a "sex differences" approach, where contrasts between women and men are necessarily simpli-

fied in order to highlight them, and a gender analysis, which may include such comparisons but puts greater emphasis on social and cultural expectations associated with gender and the ways they are incorporated into everyday life as well as being building blocks for social structures. In a gender analysis, beliefs about gender, and differential treatment or opportunities related to gender, become as important or more important than the simple noting of tendencies toward difference. We avoid exaggerating the differences, claiming them as enduring, or accepting them as natural.

Research on women academics has frequently taken the sex differences approach, whereby differentials in salary, publishing productivity, promotion chances and other characteristics and outcomes are identified and analyzed. Despite some tendency to simplify “women” into a homogeneous group, this body of research has enabled policy-makers and feminists to substantiate claims of discriminatory and unjust practices in higher education. Taken together, the various findings of disadvantageous conditions for women have underpinned a concept of a “chilly climate” (Sandler with Hall, 1986; Stalker & Prentice, 1998; Wylie, 1995) – especially prominent in North American writing – that allows a certain amount of re-focusing on environmental conditions rather than simply on “sex differences” per se. An emphasis on environment is taken further in research that adopts an organizational level approach, developing concepts such as micropolitics and workplace culture (e.g., Acker, 1999c, Eveline, 1996; Fogelberg, Hearn, Husu & Mankinen, 1999; Morley, 1999). Such research is more likely to use gender analysis than that which simply compares gender groups.

One more alternative to the sex differences approach focuses on narratives (Acker & Feuerwerker, 1996, 1997; Neumann & Peterson, 1997). The “stories” told by women academics or administrators give insights into the experiential side of being female in academe. There are a number of individual accounts in the literature, some of which illuminate the situation of minoritized women academics, thus demonstrating the need to understand gender in tandem with other social divisions (e.g., Bannerji, 1991; Carty, 1991; Choinard, 1995/96; Kolodny, 1998). What remains inevitably difficult is making the links between levels of analysis (micro-level experience vs macro-level structures) or assessing the relative roles of choice and constraint (Acker, 1994; Crompton, 1999; Dillabough, 2001; Dillabough & Acker, 2002). Additionally, with the poststructural turn in feminist analysis, the role of structures, the coherence of “identity” (and, indeed, of narratives) and the viability of categories like “women” are all rendered uncomfortably problematic (Dillabough, 2001; Paechter, 2001). At the same time, new avenues open up as we are encouraged to ask questions such as how discourses in higher education about masculinity and femininity may be organizing our everyday thinking; how might they be positioning women as subordinate; what subject positions are available to women with what

consequences; and what acts of resistance might be bringing about small social changes (Paechter, 2001).

Another disjunction of note, one which is particularly important here, is the gap between what might be called mainstream analyses of higher education policy and work done from a gender perspective. The focus of this article – the faculty shortage problem – is very much a case in point. This phrase refers to a type of demographic analysis of labour markets in higher education, usually universities. Simply put, predictions based on the number of students expected to attend universities, the number of doctorates normally produced by the system (as a qualification for university instructors), and the number of expected faculty retirements over the next decade or two suggest that university staffing in its current mode may be untenable (see next section). If these analyses are accurate, then a number of policy questions arise, including how to balance permanent and temporary academic labour, how to improve faculty recruitment, how to finance a chronically underfunded system. Applying a gender analysis – or what Catherine Marshall (1997) calls feminist critical policy analysis – to the issue produces another set of questions, such as whether the profession might become more accessible by women and less attractive to men; whether equity issues might be more prominent and chilly climates diminished as recruitment efforts increase in intensity and creativity; or (conversely) whether women are in greater danger of exploitation as university positions become more like flexible labour than tenured strongholds. Even after many years of feminist research on women in higher education, spanning the approaches described above, such questions are still not the norm in higher education policy analysis.

My arguments in this article are informed by a qualitative interview-based study of Canadian academics in faculties of education called “Making a Difference” (see Acker, 1997; Acker, 1999a,b; Acker & Armenti, in press; Acker & Feuerverger, 1996, 1997; Acker & Webber, 2000; Wyn, Acker & Richards, 2000). Interviews with 43 women and 25 men took place in the mid to late 1990s in five universities in four provinces. Below I highlight the main findings of that study.

Juggling home and work was a major concern for many of the women, either in the past or the present day. Older women in the sample had to manage without the help of policies such as maternity leave and told stories of returning to work a few days after their babies were born. Difficulties were especially apparent for younger faculty and for single parents. There were signs that despite a better policy environment, the escalation of expectations for research productivity had made their difficulties more intense. The major coping strategy seemed to be “working harder” and going without sleep. In fact, the women suspected that they worked harder than their male

colleagues, and that the specific nature of the work was different in two main ways: heavier expectations to “mother” the students and to be good citizens as members of committees in their departments, faculties and universities.

It was not only the amount of work that concerned the women but also the constant scrutiny of their performance through mechanisms of tenure, promotion and merit reviews. In North America, the tenure review, which normally takes place from five to seven years into an academic career, is a make-or-break event that determines whether or not a faculty member keeps his or her position. Canada is thought to be less draconian in its procedures than the United States and most people who go through a review will get tenure. Nevertheless, the process was approached with high anxiety. Much like American academics in the study *Heeding the New Voices* (Austin & Rice, 1998; Gappa, 2001; Rice, Sorcinelli & Austin, 2000), participants complained that the criteria were too changeable, too narrow and too ambiguous. It was commonly believed that the expectations had risen sharply over time.

It is worth noting that conditions were relatively good for women in the field of education, in the sense that most of the stories (although not all) about chilly climates and discrimination were from the past. Also, some of these concerns were shared by male colleagues. Men as well as women worried about meeting the needs of young families while coping with work pressures. There were anxieties from some junior male faculty about achieving tenure. On the whole, however, the intensity with which the women related their concerns was not matched in the interviews with men. Women were much more likely to complain of stress and health problems than were men. Many of the senior women academics gave extended accounts of illnesses, ranging from allergies to breast cancer to multiple sclerosis. Younger women, even those without children, worried about how they could ever achieve a balanced life style. Most of the participants found it difficult to separate illness from stress in their answers to questions about their health, and almost all agreed that academic life was, or could be, very stressful.

My findings do not evoke a picture of a chilly climate per se, but they suggest that some pervasive difficulties shape the organizational environment for women academics, at least in education faculties. Under the contemporary conditions within academe, faculty members are trying to be more productive in research and scholarship terms than ever before, while being closely scrutinized through processes such as elaborate tenure reviews and merit evaluations.

Although these kinds of pressures are not themselves new, there seems an extra urgency added by several features of contemporary academic life. Governments everywhere have been cutting back on core funding for post-

secondary institutions (Altbach, 1997). Universities have made up the difference by turning to the private sector, increasing the student-staff ratio, closing uneconomic units, intensifying faculty and support staff workloads and adopting a business framework of mission statements and performance indicators (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Shortages of funding and concomitant efforts of universities to be more productive with fewer resources are a global tendency and it is not surprising if such tendencies play themselves out in the lives of individuals. It remains to ask what impact the faculty shortage problem will have on the situation of women academics described above.

### *The faculty shortage problem*

In many countries, universities expanded rapidly in the 1960s and to a lesser extent into the 1970s in order to respond to increased student demand, social justice concerns about access and participation, and needs of the economy. In contrast, as noted above, from the mid-1990s the situation has been characterized by financial restraints on public sector education. In Canada, universities have seen slowing of growth in the 1980s and cutbacks in the 1990s, resulting in "today's skewed age structure" (AUCC, 2002b, p. 24), where almost a third of faculty members are over 55 and only 17 per cent under 40 (p. 21).

Given that academics in most provinces are required to retire by age 65, it is clear that there could be a steep drop in the academic work force in the coming years. Already, numbers of full-time faculty have been reduced in the past few years, reaching approximately 34,500 in 2001, 30% of which are women (AUCC, 2002b, p. 21).

While faculty numbers have grown slowly or declined during the past decades, enrolment has risen sharply and is expected to continue to rise. The combination of these trends has led to some alarming predictions. The newest edition of *Trends in Higher Education* (AUCC, 2002b) estimates that enrolment in universities will grow 20 to 30 per cent by 2011. By the same year, universities will need to replace up to 20,000 faculty lost through retirement and hire an additional 10,000 to 20,000 faculty to cope with enrolment increases, research pressures and quality improvement expectations.

Benjamin (2001) claims that there is no longer a faculty shortage problem in the United States academic labour market, due to what has been enshrined as a two-tier system. There is now a large part-time workforce, and even among full-time faculty, many academics are not on the tenure track to permanent positions. Surveys cited by Benjamin show part-time faculty are less well-off in terms of benefits, professional conditions, collegiality, office space and time for marking. There is a paradox of doctoral graduates unable to find jobs, while non-PhDs are used as casual labour. Gappa (2002)

writes: "The majority of faculty members [in the United States] no longer occupy tenure-eligible positions. Twenty-eight percent of the full-time faculty members are not eligible for tenure, and 42 percent are part-time" (p. 425).

The trend to replace full-time with part-time or limited term academics is not yet as dramatic in Canada. Nevertheless, a Statistics Canada estimate from 1997-98 suggested that there were 28,000 part-time faculty in the system, 40 per cent of whom were women (AUCC, 2002b, p. 27). Interestingly, there are indications that Canadian universities often hire their part-timers when a full-time job becomes available (p. 26).

It is wise to remember that predictions of university trends are fallible. Demand in the higher education sector is less predictable than for elementary and secondary education because post-secondary education is not compulsory, can appeal to a range of age groups and is subject to economic fluctuations and political interventions. In Canada, demand is also affected by high levels of immigration (McInnis, 2001).

It looks as if the diversity of the Canadian faculty population will increase over the coming years, given that the population retiring is disproportionately male and white, and new recruits are more likely to be women and persons of colour. In the province of Ontario, for example, women were 17 per cent of new full-time hires in 1971 but 34 per cent of that group in 1998 (Council of Ontario Universities, 2000). Nationally, the number of full-time faculty posts held by women has increased by 2000 since 1992, while those held by men have decreased by 5000 (AUCC, 2002b, p. 25). The decrease is accounted for by male retirements rather than disproportionate female hiring. Women account for slightly over one-third of new appointments, consistent with their representation among doctoral recipients in the past decade (AUCC, 2002b, p. 26).

### *Women and the faculty shortage problem*

Assuming that the predictions of a shortage are largely correct, its consequences for women depend on what the political and institutional response to the shortage is. I believe there are three main potential scenarios: 1) ways are found to hire more academics; 2) inadequate numbers of faculty are left to cope by intensifying their work; 3) partial solutions attempt to fill in the gaps, for example by depending on teaching assistants, limited term contract faculty and distance education. Below I comment on each of these possibilities, drawing out the implications for women and to a lesser extent other equity-seeking groups (which of course also include women). Readers should note that although the comments made about each scenario take into account my research and the literature, the approach is speculative.

**SCENARIO 1.** The first scenario responds to the threat of too few faculty members by redoubling efforts to recruit a wider spectrum of academics and

to fund the necessary expansion. There is already evidence of changing practices. At the University of Toronto, for example, one can see efforts to recruit more actively, attractively and efficiently. An office of faculty recruitment has been created, department chairs have been provided with workshops and materials, and job candidates are given comprehensive information about everything from income tax to religious worship in the community. In the process, there is some revival of the equity discourses that have lost ground in recent years when accountability and management discourses held sway (Blackmore, 1997). Family needs are no longer irrelevant to hiring. A system of "spousal appointments" for partners has been designed to encourage recruitment. One can imagine this process extended so that new faculty members begin to choose a university based on whether there is a job for their partner, affordable housing, good schools and hospitals, excellent salaries, manageable workloads and research facilities.

This scenario has several potential complications. First, the government would have to be persuaded that its underfunding of universities is counter-productive and needs to be reversed. Second, if the emphasis is mainly on hiring, what is it that would improve the conditions for those already in place? High salary offers for new faculty disturb those who have spent years working their way to the same or a lower level. Third, spousal appointments, if predominantly in the insecure part-time or limited term contract positions, might not be as attractive as they sound, and might actually confirm women (if they are the spouses) in the margins of the university. Finally, it is certainly possible to retain or expand positions but not share them among non-traditional groups, if there are sufficient candidates from the traditional ones.

In other words, although expanding hiring efforts is certainly welcome and even necessary, gender equity does not necessarily follow. It is possible to have reforms and improvements in an occupational setting but still produce and reproduce gender inequity, often in novel forms (Crompton, LeFeuvre & Birkelund, 1999; Dillabough & Acker, 2002). An academic labour market that is predicated on incentives for recruitment in shortage subjects runs the risk of ignoring those people not in such subjects (more often women) and acquiescing in a system of unequal rewards based on market forces and individual demands. Moreover, even with demonstrated concern for family considerations at the point of recruitment, the situation described by participants in my research is unlikely to be greatly changed. Overload, difficulties of balancing home and work, and gender-based expectations would remain unless explicitly addressed.

**SCENARIO 2.** The other scenarios assume that the government does not respond adequately to the need to support universities financially. Scenario 2 envisions simply more of the status quo: increasing intensification of work,

larger classes, higher tuition. Conflicts such as strikes by faculty that have taken place in various institutions in Canada, including York University and Dalhousie University, might become the norm, as groups battle for relative advantages. Student demand might decrease, given the impossibility of affording ever-higher tuition (creating a Malthusian compensation of sorts). Universities will try to raid each other for faculty. They might be inclined to support certain areas by curtailing others: divisiveness will increase.

In my research studies summarized above, women already reported being positioned as the good citizens and the nurturers. In an impoverished environment, the need for the emotional labour (and perhaps also the "housekeeping" labour) women traditionally provide will increase rather than decrease. If the job becomes less rewarding, one might wonder whether those men (largely white males) who have more access to external opportunities will join those who leave through retirement. It may well be that the academic labour force will become more diverse more quickly, but this could be something of a pyrrhic victory if working conditions are in perpetual decline.

**SCENARIO 3.** The third scenario is one where university teaching is increasingly performed by a reserve army of casualized labour, one that can be expanded or contracted according to need. My earlier discussion showed that this direction has already been taken by American universities. Women are a larger proportion of this peripheral academy than of full-time tenure track faculty (approximately 40 per cent vs. 30 per cent) in Canada. True, such limited term positions have often provided employment for women who might otherwise not manage to get a toehold in the academy at all. For some people, these positions are ideal, as they have no immediate need or desire to become full-time academics on a tenure track. But for many, they are second-best, and the remuneration is low. With major faculty shortages, the universities might have to make greater use of these categories of instructors, although this pool could also dry up.

Ideas have been floated about creating different career paths within the academic world, and improving the conditions for the "teaching track," people who would have security but be relieved of expectations for extensive research. As long as women retain major responsibility for child-care (which my research suggests is still a current concern), there is always a danger that they will end up in a teaching track, regardless of preference, especially if those doing the hiring have stereotyped expectations.

Increasing the use of distance education, where large numbers can be taught at low cost, has also been suggested as a response to faculty shortage. Here, too, there are hidden hazards, especially as the preferred mode becomes computer conferencing, which carries health dangers of repetitive injury

syndrome and eye troubles. The women I interviewed already had health concerns. While some might prefer to work from a home computer (highlighting family responsibilities again), that might be more from necessity than choice, and would have consequences for their ability to enjoy the collegiality and other advantages of academia.

### *Conclusion*

In the pages above, I have advocated a gender analysis approach to questions that arise in higher education policy, including the issue of predicted faculty shortages in Canadian universities. I have reviewed some of the relevant feminist literature and theory, summarized the results of a qualitative study that gives us insights into the current situation of women academics, described the faculty shortage problem, and speculated on what the anticipated future might mean for women and their concerns.

A gender analysis focuses our attention on the consequences for women of any policy change. It incorporates questions of “sex differences” – for example, the relative proportions of women and men among newly hired faculty or their chances of promotion – but also extends consideration to the institutional and social context, assuming these social structures themselves are characterized by gender divisions and gendered expectations. The social structures are seen as constraining but not as immovable, as they themselves are made up of beliefs, cultures and actions that are always in flux.

The next few decades offer chances for radical change. In part, social attitudes have changed and continue to change, but alongside these developments, there are demographic and economic upheavals to consider. We now have universities that are altering their character due to insufficient funding, new technologies, increasing enrolment and changing ideologies. There is every sign that the proportions of women and of minority groups (including women) will be rising throughout that period, as the generation dominated by white men retires in large numbers. To the extent that hiring is kept to modest numbers, this change will be slow (Renner & Mwenifumbo, 1995) and even if women are a larger proportion, they will be a larger proportion of a shrinking labour force. In that case, those academics left in full-time positions will see their working conditions continue to deteriorate and their workloads intensify, probably accompanied by increasing accountability and external control over their performances, a trend already in place. Scenario 2 and 3 will probably operate in tandem, as the slack will be taken up by part-time and limited contract faculty, providing a mixed blessing for the disproportionately female group that tends to occupy those positions.

The shape of academic careers may well become quite different, as Gappa (2002) suggests, perhaps in ways rarely thought of today. A certain amount

of flexibility in what is considered an academic career might even be helpful for those young academics trying to raise families while performing at a high enough level for the tenure track. Another unknown is the response of the general public to deteriorating university conditions. Parents may be less and less patient with higher tuition, more competition for entry, cramped classrooms, crumbling buildings, larger classes and fewer tenured professors teaching their children. Eventually, there may be pressure on the government through this route.

If demand for faculty outweighs supply, as the predictions indicate, we may see continued improvement in recruitment efforts and attempts to make the academic career attractive again, my Scenario 1. So far, I see few efforts to improve the collegial aspect of academe, to make balancing home and work less traumatic, to reduce stress, or to tackle the inequities of women having an extra layer of work around nurturing students and being good citizens in their departments. In other words, the concerns expressed by my research participants are not usually those found in current policy.

Even in Scenario 1, the most promising of the three, and the only one that appears good for the profession overall, there are a few aspects that could trouble the advocate of gender equity, mainly the tendency towards working with market forces and rewarding individuals in fields where recruitment problems are especially acute, while potentially making things worse for those (often women) in subjects where these market forces are not offering competing, lucrative careers to university work. Gender divisions are deep and often elusive, and there is always the possibility that we can reconfigure and restructure them but not abolish them. Solutions to the faculty shortage problem could present better opportunities for women who have been kept on the margins of academe – but there are no guarantees and there could as easily be regression as progress.

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## *The Concerns of Canadian Women Academics*

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