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# The trouble with 'work–life balance' in neoliberal academia: a systematic and critical review

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**ABSTRACT**

The rise of neoliberal governance in the higher education sector and the growing demands that the values of equality be institutionally embedded represent two potentially conflicting trends. In this context, the steady deployment of a neoliberal agenda to organizations has come to interfere with the work–life balance. Whereas the demands of the neoliberal university rely upon a hegemonic work-centric model that can affect academics irrespective of gender, women are more likely to experience work–life conflict and its associated impacts. This article focuses on how work–life conflict has been studied with three main objectives. First, to map the challenges of combining work and private life in the neoliberalised university. Second, to conduct a systematic review of the literature on work–life balance in academia. Third, to discuss findings and limitations in order to propose research recommendations. As the COVID-19 pandemic raises new and specific challenges to work–life balance, more gender inclusive and theoretically informed studies are needed to tackle the blind spots found here.

## Introduction

The gendered implications of the interference between work and private life have raised concern among policy-makers at European, national and university levels (Rosa, Drew, & Canavan, 2020), while also drawing the attention of researchers. These implications have been particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as there is a widening gap in time devoted to children and elders between women and men (UNWOMEN, 2020). Neoliberalised academia is defined here as the governance model for universities combining free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices that rely upon work-centric organizational cultures to increase competition and production (Lorenz, 2012). These are seen to jeopardize the attainability of work–life balance (WLB) impacting on recruitment, promotion and selection processes, the evaluation of academic excellence and networking practices (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). The neoliberalization of academia and its 'ideal worker' (someone unencumbered by outside demands) must be discussed against the background of gendered organizational structures and practices that expect total dedication to work. The difficulties engaged in respect of personal and professional lives, gender differences in handling these and their effects on career advancement are all subjects that inform work–life conflict (WLC). Drawing on scholarship on WLC, this article examines the challenges of combining paid and unpaid work, as well as non-work commitments.

This article is divided into four main sections. First, it discusses the challenges of WLB under the current neoliberal climate in academia. Second, it presents a theoretical framework for analysis. Third, it reviews the literature on WLB and maps the barriers to overcome WLC. Lastly, the article

discusses findings and limitations, and proposes recommendations taking into particular consideration the likely gendered consequences of the measures introduced during the COVID-19 outbreak.

## Work–life balance and gender equality in the neoliberal university

While WLB has been an important attraction for those entering an academic career, it is at the meeting point of two potentially conflicting trends: neoliberal thinking and equality and diversity policies (Drew & Canavan, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) have gone through government funding cuts, restructuring and downsizing as a consequence of neoliberal economic trends (Power, 2020). Thirty years ago, when Acker (1990) explained how gender is embedded in traditional organizations, universities were characterized by standardized job descriptions, career ladders, élitist authority relations and manager-controlled evaluations. In the new neoliberal system professors have less authority to define merit, and evaluations are less local and contextualized and based more on performance according to quantified standards of productivity (Ferree & Zippel, 2015). Notwithstanding, gender inequality is still built into academia, as shown by the fact that women are affected by WLC and consider leaving more often than men due to the normative expectations regarding their responsibility for household caring and labour (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Drew & Marshall, 2020). Today women struggle more with WLB because the ideal worker lying behind the neoliberal governance model – someone unencumbered by non-work demands – is grounded on gendered divisions. These divisions are founded in private reproductive labour as well as the academic labour in which women are more likely to have greater collegial duties; such as teaching, administrative and pastoral responsibilities, which tend to be less valued than research (Manfredi, 2017).

The large-scale organizational changes in the neoliberalised university accompany increasingly stressful work ruled by standards of academic excellence (Rosa & Clavero, 2020). These standards serve as a benchmark for evaluations at key career stages. Ergo, most academics work evenings and weekends because they are expected to fulfill a diversity of demands, such as innovative research, publishing in high-impact journals, teaching/supervising students, building networks, and bringing money into the university through research grants. Furthermore, excellence is linked to mobility, since academics are expected to spend periods at different universities, spanning other countries. The construction of 'excellence' is gendered, as its consequences are different for female and male researchers. Growing literature unveils the differential status of men and women with temporary contracts in academia (Herschberg, Benschop, & Van Den Brink, 2019; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019).

In this environment, old hegemonic masculine ideologies are perpetuated and reproduced through the celebration of competition, increased pressure to 'succeed', the pre-eminence of individualist over traditional collegiate values and the invisibilization, devaluation and displacement of care (Ivancheva, Lynch, & Keating, 2019; Lipton, 2017). Further, job security is reduced with austerity measures (Gill & Scharff, 2013).

Profound gendered divisions in academic labour and capital continue to exist, as revealed by the persistence of gender imbalances throughout the hierarchy (European Commission, 2019). Organizations are urged to adopt equality policies which promote professional productivity regardless of gender, creating an environment that specifically encourages individuals with care responsibilities to take on leadership positions. Flexible work arrangements, family-friendly hours, leave and campus facilities are recurrent features. At both national and institutional levels, work–life policies present challenges to the neoliberal trend in academia, where male-dominated perspectives emphasize working outside of the office regardless of non-work obligations (Smidt, Pétursdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2017). The entrenched gendered ethos, long-hours culture promoted by management strategies and working from home during Covid-19 lockdowns, as well as flexibility in work hours and technology, extend expectations and demands in all spheres of working life (Currie & Eveline, 2011; Nash & Churchill, 2020). Not surprisingly, academics are working in a hybrid space of perpetual availability and conflating the poles of the work/life dichotomy (Cannizzo & Osbaldiston, 2016).

## Framework of analysis

This analysis takes a critical approach to the literature interrogating the extent to which scholarship goes beyond surface-level issues to show the dynamics underlying the work–life interface in academia. This approach is underpinned by three core assumptions.

First, gender constitutes an integral dimension of the articulation of work, structuring the division of paid and unpaid work that assigns different roles to men and women. This paper draws on different strands of feminist and social theory avoiding simplistic generalizations underlying the analysis of power structuring work–life. It is particularly informed by Connell (1987) who defines gender as a fundamental cultural construction structuring social relations and personal identity as well as by poststructural and post-modern feminist theory, conceiving gender not as fixed category, but as the social ordering of difference entailing daily 'performances' which create the illusion of fixity to individuals, who are actively and endlessly 'doing gender' (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Additionally, it is informed by authors who stress the role of contexts that shape gender relations, particularly 'meso-level' institutional and 'gendering' processes involving power (Bradley, 2007). These processes are to be addressed through the complex intersection between gender and class since HEIs are locations in which not only class relations are produced (Acker, 2006), but also where care-work is still viewed as a woman's issue (Rosa & Clavero, 2020). Universities are 'gendered organizations' insofar as gender shapes discourses and practices, along with the constraints and opportunities, of those working in them (Acker, 1990).

Second, any investigation of the work–life interface requires a definition of WLB to allow for a distinction between its theoretical use and the different discursive approaches to it at policy, institutional and individual levels. This paper examines how far the literature has been informed by gender theory, as well as how WLB has been conceptualized. We can speak of 'balance' whenever the demands of professional and private life are harmonious. Nonetheless, it is a research challenge to show the conditions under which this compatibility is defined at both individual and institutional levels. Moreover, as patterns of domestic and personal life have diversified, research should address all aspects of life, including domestic tasks, care-work, education and leisure (Ransome, 2007) rather than reduce personal life to mean solely domestic life. There is a traditional and neoliberal understatement concerning all those who do not fit into parental heteronormativity and look for intrinsic satisfaction outside a linear hierarchical academic career. Research should problematize the barriers between work and personal life as these barriers become blurred (Huppatz, Sang, & Napier, 2019). Particularly in academia, it is common to schedule work activities outside traditional working hours and to perform work activities in the home (Rosa & Clavero, 2020). The blurring of these barriers has consequences for how individuals perceive interference between professional and personal life (Fangel & Aaløkke's, 2008). Additionally, the social-distancing, quarantine and isolation of COVID-19 may have gendered implications by acting to further confuse the boundaries in defining work and private life.

Lastly, this review assumes that individuals' strategies for combining work and personal life are shaped by dominant cultural family models as well as social and institutional conditions. I contend that research on WLB in academia should consider a two-fold strategy, which merges: (1) intersectionality (observing the overlapping dynamics of gender, class, race, nation, marital and parental status, age, sexuality and other inequalities and axes of power); and (2) a framework to investigate the interaction between institutional and individual levels with respect to WLC.

Dominant cultural family models take the form of norms/values resulting from assumptions about gender relations and the division of labour. These norms are structurally embedded through existing legislation, which may impact gender equality and strengthen the gendered relationship of the family to employment and childcare by, for instance, disproportionately allocating paternity and maternity leave (Pfau-Effinger, 2012). Existing literature on WLB has focused on the barriers in combining careers with 'good' motherhood (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019) to uncover and subvert entrenched gender norms that act to promote men's quick return to paid work, forcing mothers to

become 'experts' in childcare (Thun, 2020). A number of authors have criticized the failure to address the work–life experiences of those individuals outside the frame of the traditional nuclear family (Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011; Pillay & Abhayawansa, 2014). Intersectional perspectives open the possibility of critical approaches to traditional understandings (Rosa & Clavero, 2020) by enabling an analysis of how gender and other social identities can interact to affect individual work–life experience by, for instance, considering 'caring masculinity' (Ranson, 2015).

Here, how the structural interferes with the relational that is, how public policy, care services, workplace policies, organizational cultures, job resources and the quality of jobs impact on attitudes and practices is also assessed. I contend that in order to understand academic work–life choices it is crucial to investigate the individual's perception of what she/he is entitled to claim as well as the scope of alternatives in exercising claims; how this perception is formed; how it affects individual bargaining positions; and the mechanisms/interactions in place that allow/hinder work–life choices (Hobson, 2018; Ren & Caudle, 2020). In the neoliberal university, where long working days are the norm, there is a gap in opportunity to claim the rights to combine work and personal life between those with a permanent position and those with temporary contracts. Among the latter, women are particularly affected since precarious working conditions and maternity combine, resulting in 'dependency on the goodwill of more senior academics and the accompanying sense of subservience that it can produce' (Rosa & Clavero, 2020). During the pandemic, opportunities for women scholars to claim their rights was compromised especially among faculty of colour, who are even more likely to perform precarious, unpaid and emotional labour (Codding et al., 2020; Oleschuk, 2020).

## Methods

To provide a critical and overarching review of the literature, I undertook an exhaustive search using the ISI Web of Knowledge database, which includes all journals in the Social Science Citation Index. I searched for peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on the nexus of work and life in academia using the keywords of 'work–life academia', 'work–lifework–life university', 'work-family university', and 'family-friendly academia'. I limited the search to works written between 1990–2020 in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian in the following areas: sociology, family studies, women's studies, religion studies, psychology, behavioural sciences, business and management, nursing and medicine. A key review limitation was the inability to access many book chapters due to the papers being locked in editors' portals. Therefore, some conclusions presented may not be universally applicable.

The initial search results returned 292 articles/reviews. While roughly half of these specifically focus on WLB or WLC issues, the remaining half address WLB as one of many study variables such as stress, job satisfaction, job performance, or mental health. I limited coverage only to those works focusing on WLB or WLC in academia. The list of journals (see Appendix 1) includes 143 articles specifically addressing work–life issues in academia, and the overwhelming majority (121) are papers published from 2010 onwards. As for the target universe, over two-thirds (98) of those articles contain original empirical data on academic and other university staff, such as support staff and clerical positions, management and university administration; roughly one-fifth (27) are papers on university students; less than one in twenty (6) are papers on nurses and doctors working in university hospitals; and a residual number (3) are papers on college athletic trainers. The remaining literature (9) focuses on institutional policies.

The literature on the work–life interface in academia can be classified into seven categories according to the dimensions addressed. First, there are studies particularly focused on academics' experiences. While some of these studies cover both female and male academics' experiences (López, 2017; Misra, Lundquist, & Templer, 2012), the majority address women's experiences (Cisternas & Navia, 2020; O'Connor, O'Hagan, & Gray, 2018). This category also includes studies focusing on academics who 'choose' to work part-time (Fox, Schwartz, & Hart, 2006; Harrison & Gregg, 2009) and dual-career academic couples (Tzanakou, 2017). Second, there are studies that draw on comparative approaches to academics' experiences in different countries (Loison et al.,

2017; Ren & Caudle, 2020) and from different national and cultural backgrounds (Denson, Szelényi, & Bresonis, 2018; Pillay & Abhayawansa, 2014), or academics and non-academics' work–life experiences (Fontinha, Easton, & Van Laar, 2019). Third, other research focuses on the consequences of neoliberal changes for work–life interface in academia. This category includes studies investigating the impact of new managerialism demands (Callaghan, 2016; Nikunen, 2014) and their effects on the implementation of WLB policies (Smidt et al., 2017); studies focusing on the gendered consequences of pervasive precarious work contracts among early career researchers (Bozzon, Murgia, Poggio, & Rapetti, 2017); and studies examining the impact of the post-PhD period of transnational mobility on family arrangements (Toader & Dahinden, 2018). Fourth, there are studies devoted to parenthood and childcare issues. While many authors have investigated academic and student mothers' experiences (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Thun, 2020), and some have focused on faculty father's experiences (Reddick, Rochlen, Grasso, Reilly, & Spikes, 2012; Sallee, 2013), few have analysed the differential experiences of academic mothers and academic fathers in combining work and family life (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). The experiences of academics without children have been much less studied – I found one paper specifically focused on this (Solomon, 2011). Fifth, there are studies that focus either on the discourses or expectations about WLB. This category includes not only studies investigating discourses that faculty engage in framing the challenges faced by female academics in constructing their relationship to work–life balance (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016), but also on the expectations surrounding career and family-life among women academics (Cervia & Biancheri, 2017) as well as students' perceptions of career, family roles and work demands (Andrade, Ferraz, Oliveira, & Hatfield, 2019; Reissová, Šimsová, & Laslofi, 2018). Sixth, several researchers have investigated the role of policies at institutional levels and the social support available to overcome WLC. This category includes studies investigating the gendered consequences of the availability of work–life policies and programmes (Bodkin & Fleming, 2019; Feeney, Bernal, & Bowman, 2014; Juraqulova, McCluskey, & Mittelhammer, 2019); the faculty's engagement with those policies (Cannizzo, Mauri, & Osbaldiston, 2019; Shauman, Howell, Paterniti, Beckett, & Villablanca, 2018); or the role of supervisors' experiences in offering flexible work arrangements to staff (Jaoko, 2012; Wells-Lepley, Thelen, & Swanberg, 2015). Lastly, there are studies that focus on the role of WLB in the well-being of university staff (Rahim, Osman, & Arumugam, 2019), as well as the role of new technologies in combining work and non-work demands (Currie & Eveline, 2011).

## Overviewing the literature

The majority of the papers in this review do not reflect upon the concept of WLB or take a critical approach to gender perspectives in addressing the work–life interface. Few contribute to the debate on the consequences of gendered assumptions regarding the management of work and private-life. Most literature does not address the WLB concept as a social construction and takes for granted that 'work–life' is synonymous with 'work-family' failing to put the relationship between work and private-life into the context of the gendered division of labour. I found four types of papers according to how far they define WLB and apply a gender perspective whilst studying work–life in academia. The first and largest type is characterized by a lack of debate about WLB and gender: more than four out of ten papers (62) on work–life interface do not properly clarify what 'WLB' is, referring solely to work-family issues, and, when they do, fail to discuss gender as a concept. A second type is composed of papers that apply a gender perspective, or at least put gender into context by presenting statistical data, yet without defining the WLB concept: three out of ten articles (43) do not question or define WLB, but several papers put gender into context, and some theoretically discuss gender. A third type includes the literature which does not address WLB through gender: two out of 10 papers (29) present a definition of WLB, but almost all of these articles do not address it from a gender perspective. Lastly, a small number of papers (9) fall into a fourth literature category, which takes a critical approach by looking through the lens of gender.

Throughout the following subsections I review the literature according to the six main themes on which research has hitherto been focused: (1) employees' satisfaction, well-being and performance; (2) roles, choices and the conflict between work and family demands; (3) maternity, career progression and leadership; (4) WLB challenges for early-career academics; (5) students' perceptions and performance; (6) employer policies and organizational culture.

### Employees' satisfaction, well-being and performance

The main aim of several studies is to investigate relationships among work-family conflict, job satisfaction and well-being of university employees by focusing on the effects of these on their work performance (Lisnic, Zajicek, & Kerr, 2019; Soomro, Breitenecker, & Shah, 2018). The conflict between work and family-life is often addressed as a social problem – and not as a sociological problem – amplified by lower organizational support for WLB, less flexible work arrangements, low schedule flexibility and campus facilities, lower levels of separation between work and home–life, and absence of physical well-being and mental health programmes (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Saltmarsh & Randell-Moon, 2015). Some literature investigates the (lack of) awareness of WLB among employees without debating the concept itself (Kim & Windsor, 2015; Tanaka, Maruyama, Ooshima, & Ito, 2011). The work–family interface is mostly considered as a mediator variable of the impact of work demands on well-being and performance (Beigi, Shirmohammadi, & Kim, 2015; Nicklin, McNall, Cerasoli, Varga, & McGivney, 2016).

Exceptionally the literature addresses the work–family interface through the gender lens, although without theoretically exploring gender theory and adopting a non-critical positivistic approach. For instance, while showing that women are less likely than men to 'agree that their institution and departmental colleagues do what they can to make family obligations and an academic career compatible' (Lisnic et al., 2019, p. 350), researchers suggest, based on previous work, that this is because 'women more likely than men experience pressures to reach tenure while they perform more campus service and are more likely to be engaged in caregiving responsibilities' (ibid.). Despite its limitations as far as gender is concerned, all this literature suggests that WLC severely interferes with outcomes for university employees.

### Roles, choices and the conflict between work and family demands

In several studies on academics' experiences of combining work and private-life not only is WLC reduced to work-*family* conflict, but also gender is often not considered as a concept, being treated either as a descriptive variable indicating differences between the 'sexes' (Burley, 1994) or as a rationale – women are the main carers within the family – behind their selection of female academics as the subjects of study (Muasya, 2016). Because WLC is often synonymous with work-*family* conflict, some authors address it as a role-conflict. The psychological effects of work-family conflict are the main focus of a diversity of research which does not address the gendered division of labour that structures paid/unpaid work (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006). Other studies investigate the bi-directional conflict of work with family, and family with work, without applying the gender lens but showing differences and commonalties by gender in factors affecting interference in reported work–family conflict (Fox, Fonseca, & Bao, 2011; Watanabe and Falci, 2016).

Nevertheless, there is some literature on role conflict showing that not only do academic mothers spend significantly more time on childcare than academic fathers (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016), but also less time on work activities, such as research, that count most towards career advancement, even if they devote the same overall time to their employment (Misra et al., 2012). Those studies take a critical stance by remarking that the university is a masculine workplace, focusing on the structural and institutional norms that interfere with women's ability to balance their work and family roles, and recommending academic institutions revise their cultures (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2018).

This critical stance is important since literature has shown that the pervasive discourse of *choice* serves to obscure the gender inequalities that paradoxically define the context in which it exists by focusing on family-related topics (such as the fact that women take on the greatest share of childcare/housework, or that male partners' career decisions are prioritized in heterosexual couples). This relinquishes administrators from responsibility for change (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; López, 2017). I highlight in this regard O'Connor et al.'s study on how the social practices of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) 'variously prioritise, reconcile or devalue career and non-work relationships such that the hierarchical relationship between masculinity(ies) and femininity(ies) is largely maintained' (2018, p. 313). Informed by both post-structuralist and social constructionist feminist approaches – which understand femininities as performed gender identities – the authors show that femininities are reflexively 'adapted and expanded so as to make women's lives liveable within the masculine culture of STEM' (ibid.). Therefore, a heuristic typological framework which critically engages with rationalistic and gender blind approaches is developed – such as Hakim's 'preference' theory presenting women's choices as only governed by their interests (Rosa, 2018(a)) – and identifies how organizational culture shapes femininities. By presenting some of the femininities that contribute to institutionalizing women's under-representation in STEM as – 'careerist', 'individualised', 'vocational' and 'family-oriented' – O'Connor et al.'s typology reveals the implicit expectations underlying career experiences and organizational cultures, that is: 'expectations that the reconciliation of the competing demands of STEM and (nonwork) relationships is an individualised responsibility' and 'assumptions that the prioritization of family commitment is unacceptable for women in STEM' (2018, p. 326).

Finally, it should be noted that there is a paucity of literature employing an intersectionality lens in addressing work-family conflict even when it specifically focuses on the differences and commonalities between migrant and domestic university employees (Pillay & Abhayawansa, 2014).

### *Maternity, career progression and leadership*

Also reducing WLC to work-*family* conflict, several studies focus on academic motherhood – there is a dearth of research on fatherhood. Literature focusing on motherhood can be divided as follows: the studies that do not discuss gender while investigating, for instance, how pregnancy transforms scholarly women through the internal gaze and the subjectivities of the institution (Trussell, 2015); the literature putting gender into context while studying how lack of time makes it difficult to meet both 'ideal worker' and 'good mother' norms (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006) and how the gendered division of labour is an 'organizing principle' of women's experience (Cisternas & Navia, 2020); and lastly those studies inspired by different feminist theories – from feminist organizational theory to matricentric theory – while addressing academic motherhood (Thun, 2020; Huopalainen & Satama, 2019).

As an example of the latter, Thun's study (2020) explores the different meanings of gender equality by addressing the organization of academic work and pressures on mothers in academia, as well as the legitimization of gender inequality provided by discourses of excellence in the organizational culture. Drawing on constructionist gender theory, it observes how 'gendered understandings are reproduced and challenged through organizational processes' in 'greedy' organizations such as HEI's. Alongside those processes, Thun's study notes a discourse of excellence that emphasizes diversity and gender balance as positive for research quality – since it is built as compatible with the ideal of gender equality – and shows that it is through this discourse that gender equality measures are co-opted in a neoliberal agenda, but does not address the university as a 'gendered organization' (Acker, 1990). Thun's study suggests that policy initiatives such as subsidized parental leave and day-care centres are 'necessary, but not sufficient in order to combine an academic career and parenthood' (2020, p.178). Once neoliberal rationale is pervasive and this balance has been searched for foreign researchers, the author finally recommends tackling gender inequality, built into the structure of academic work, so as to make a university more internationally competitive.

There is a scarcity of literature on academic fatherhood. Only three papers address the issue, either observing that organizational structures and culture hinder the involvement of male academics with their children (Sallee, 2012, 2013) or showing that academic fathers are unfamiliar with family-friendly policies (often assuming that options are targeted exclusively at women) (Reddick et al., 2012). Further research is needed to investigate how organizational practices/culture prevent academic fathers from excelling in both work and family-life and how men who do not fit the hegemonic male norm are disciplined (Hearn, 2020).

The literature on the challenges of parenthood for academic women focuses on its consequences over the course of women's careers. While some studies investigate the relationship between work-family conflict and female leadership (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; Plessis, Rothmann, & Botha, 2018), other literature focuses on the barriers to women's career progression (Kachchaf, Ko, Hodari, & Ong, 2015; Socratous, Galloway, & Kamenou-Aigbekaen, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a lack of research specifically devoted to the implications of WLC on *leaky pipelines*. While these are gendered phenomena as they imply the progressive disappearance of women while climbing the career ladder, thinking about them requires a composite and systemic view of their causes so as to grasp the wider picture of their systemic and organizational environment levels (Dubois-Shaik, Fusulier, & Vincke, 2019). For instance, the interweaving of work–life decisions and the 'non-happenings' (Husu, 2020) in female academics' career – that is, male networks' hidden processes, the mutual support systems of men, the relative invisibility of women – remains understudied.

As for literature on female leadership in academia, I highlight Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova's study (2017) on the experiences of women in academic leadership positions in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The study draws on both neo-institutional and intersectional theory and reviews different theoretical approaches to gender – from human capital to gender role theory, from gendered organization to performative leadership theory – so to address the multiple identities that women have to maintain when communicating with their colleagues, superiors and extended family members. As this shows, identities are multiple because academic women strive to meet conflicting expectations imposed by three dominant cultures – Traditional, Soviet and Westernized neo-liberal. Regarding literature on barriers to women's career progression, some studies observe gender differences – such that full-time men are more likely to be on the tenure track than women, who are more likely to choose part-time status to undertake childcare than men – or investigate how perceptions that women should be the primary caregiver hinder their advancement without discussing gender as a concept (Fox et al., 2006; Socratous et al., 2016). Only Kachchaf et al.'s study (2015) debates gender theory. This study applies intersectionality while investigating how racial/ethnic and gender identities conjoin to form obstacles for women of colour in STEM. The study draws on theory of cumulative disadvantage to address the multiple marginalities of the female academic as well as the conditions of institutional tokenism under which they work and that make them more visible and isolated. As Kachchaf et al.'s study shows, women of colour in STEM face barriers to meet the ideal worker expectations due to a combination of factors, such as 'a dearth of mentors and culturally competent advisory support; social exclusion by peers who embody the ideal worker norm, resulting in a lack of social and professional network support; (...) questioning of competence and dedication to science based on race, gender, and/or parental status' (2015, p.188).

## WLB challenges for early-career academics

While research and policy initiatives, such as Gender Equality Plans, have focused on the leaking pipeline of female academics with permanent contracts (Rosa et al., 2020), academia is mostly sustained today by postdoctoral academic labourers, a new form of scientific proletariat working 'through short-term research projects and part-time teaching, sometimes over an extended period and multiple sites or continents' (Hearn, 2020, p. 106). The neoliberal university reinforces masculine norms, and the gender structures in higher education and research, through the cultural imperative of total commitment, which 'represents a 'manstory' relying on a hero myth that glorifies individual

achievements and success' (Ylijoki, 2013, p. 249). This is additional to the hidden assumption that there are others who take care of the private sphere (Fusulier, Barbier, & Dubois-Shaik, 2017). There is a growing literature devoted to the experiences of early-career academics, who have to handle – through unstable contracts and unclear career prospects – increasing work-loads with the speeding up of the tempo and rhythm in research (Baader, Böhringer, Korff, & Roman, 2017; Bozzon et al., 2017) and be ready to move internationally (Tower & Latimer, 2016; Tzanakou, 2017).

Some literature only adds gender as a variable in analyses treating it as a property of individuals, while showing that temporary academics report higher job exhaustion and turnover intentions but lower WLC compared to permanent workers (Mauno et al., 2015), or suggests that equal opportunity between women and men is not a core issue in the promotion of postdoctoral researchers while not addressing the organization of everyday life (Baader et al., 2017). Some studies are informed by gender inequalities in academia while addressing work–family interferences in scientific careers (Bozzon et al., 2017; Nikunen, 2014).

As an example of the latter, I highlight Fusulier et al.'s study (2017) investigating the features that support the scientific career of postdoctoral researchers through work (a supportive promoter, access to a 'carrier network', benevolent colleagues) and an individual's private milieu (strong support from parents and partner, easy access to services, living near the workplace). The authors observe that the two types of support do not seem equally distributed between women and men. For instance, an ambivalent relationship to their career is mainly expressed by young mothers, who often express the feeling of neither being a sufficiently good researcher nor an adequate carer to a child. Fusulier et al. found that ambivalence is 'linked to deficient support configurations which may play themselves out in very concrete aspects of daily life, such as regularly going to pick up a child at the end of day-care because the husband is not available, being subjected to the disapproving glances of colleagues who stay late at the laboratory, or in being subjected to the remarks of the day-care centre entourage and employees on the benefits of family time' (2017, p.367). Finally, the study shows that, if support configurations appear more naturalized and less problematic in male trajectories, they are crucial for the winning trajectories of female researchers who obtain a highly valued permanent position in academia. By revealing that women depend on support that they find in their work and private environment, since the institution fails to provide for female academics, Fusulier et al.'s findings suggest the need to find organizational solutions that go beyond the privatization of responsibility and specific gender expectations underlying the traditional view of a trade-off between work and private life (2017). Organizational solutions are important to tackle the postfeminist attitude of female researchers observed in Nikunen's study (2014). This attitude mobilizes a rhetoric of meritocracy, entrepreneurism, risk and personal choice, while trying to justify strategies to combine work and family life – such as organizing family life with the help of grandparents and spouses or postponing motherhood – without holding the academy responsible for creating a family-friendly work environment. This is summarized as follows by Nikunen 'problems of equality and family arrangements are perceived as belonging to the private sphere; they are not treated as social problems' (2014, p. 131).

The current call in the name of 'excellence' not only points towards more productivity, competition and accountability, but also towards mobility. Recent literature has been devoted to its gendered effects on career advancement and work–life interference, whether investigating how women and men consider family arrangements in regard to a long-term post-PhD periods of transnational mobility, focusing on the ways in which the concerns of raising children in a foreign country complicate the ways in which parents try to navigate work and family issues, or addressing the work-family challenges for couples where both partners pursue careers. This literature reveals that: there is a growing impact of gender roles in the context of mobility, as well as an increasing complexity in transnational mobility compared to the 'classical model' of mobile academic men and non-mobile or 'tied mover' women (Toader & Dahinden, 2018). International faculty fathers may assume greater roles in their children's lives than if they might have had they have not been removed from support structures in their countries of origin (Sallee & Hart, 2015). Dual-career

programmes are mostly available to newly appointed professors but not at the early-career stage, where 'issues of childcare, housing and financial assistance are more critical than for comparably better-paid professors' (Tzanakou, 2017, p. 306).

## Students' perceptions and performance

There is a diversity of studies devoted to students' perceptions and expectations regarding work-family balance showing, for instance, that once male students are parents, they prioritize their roles as fathers (Sallee, 2015). Most of these studies do not define WLB, but presume that private life is equivalent to family life.

Among the articles, Gómez-Urrutia & Urrizola's study (2017) represents an exception in which personal life is not reduced to family life and the findings show that young people are demanding a new balance between life (understood mainly as personal and family time) and work, suggesting changes in the way work–family life is organized and bringing new challenges for public policy. Against the current neoliberal scenario, their findings suggest that 'investing in oneself and revaluing one's time and personal projects (over organizational ones) seems to be a way of protecting oneself against uncertainty' (Gómez-Urrutia & Urrizola, 2017, p. 515).

Most of this work does not employ a gender lens (Geyer, 2018; Van Steenbergen, Ybema, & Lapierre, 2018) or use gender as a descriptive or predictor variable (Cinamon; 2010; Myers & Major, 2017), thus recognizing differences and commonalities between male and female students without critically examining these through analytical frameworks informed by gender theory. Such studies conclude, for instance, that: men who were exposed to egalitarian child-care models anticipate lower levels of work-family conflict (Cinamon, 2006); that there is a prevalence of 'neo-traditional' ideals positioning men as the breadwinner (Utomo, 2012); that male and female adults may not be 'realistically' anticipating work-family conflict (Coyle et al., 2015); or that only women, among students with traditional gender attitudes, are likely to sacrifice career opportunities (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2016).

## Employer policies and organizational culture

Considerable literature is devoted to institutional policies aimed at supporting academics in combining work and private-life. There is focus on employer policies (Juraqulova_et_al, 2019; Li & Peguero, 2015), observing, for instance, the variability in approach to, and accommodations for, lactation (Henry-Moss, Lee, Benton, & Spatz, 2019); child-care voucher programmes (Morrissey, Warner, & Buehler, 2009); integrated career–life planning; coaching to create a customized plan to meet both partners' career and life goals; time-banking systems (Fassiotto, Simard, Sandborg, Valantine, & Raymond, 2018), or the provision of formal policies for students (Bodkin & Fleming, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research that takes a macro-sociological approach and discusses the embedding of universities in different welfare states and gender regimes. For instance, while some welfare systems are either conservative or liberal regarding gender equality by providing little support for working parents, some leave systems, such as the Swedish or the Portuguese, conversely promote a 'caring paternity' by providing a bonus for sharing of parental leave, which enables the father to stay at home with the baby while the mother returns to full-time work (Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2014; Rosa, 2018(b)).

Other research focuses on supervisors' attitudes regarding workplace flexibility (Jaoko, 2012; Wells-Lepley et al., 2015); organizational cultures (Lester, 2015); and employees' (Cannizzo et al., 2019; Shauman et al., 2018) and students' perceptions, and use, of available options (Bodkin & Fleming, 2019; Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009).

Among this literature, I highlight four studies as they not only address work–life policies by taking a critical approach as far as WLB or gender are concerned, but also productively use, in an integrated manner, the different institutional and individual levels on which mechanisms reproducing gender

(in)equality act and retroact. Even if they all reduce 'work–life*work–life*' interface to 'work-*family*' issues, these papers address WLB policies as culturally symbolic texts which have the potential to re-inscribe relations of power and reinforce the gendered rationale underlying WLC.

The first two highlighted studies are both informed by poststructuralist feminist theory. By interviewing female scholars, Toffoletti and Starr observe that WLB is 'enabling, desirable and achievable for women' showing that conceptualizations of WLB 'remain unproblematized; hence, naturalized as something which individuals should strive to meet' (2016, p.501). The authors examine discursive tensions between the way participants construct WLB as impossible to achieve and institutional policies that configure flexible work arrangements as empowering and enabling, concluding that those tensions reveal the power of WLB discourse to stigmatize those who fail to meet ideal expectations. In turn, Lester's study addresses the relationship between power and the ability to make choices – which defines the creation of unequal policies between faculty and staff and no policies for students – by identifying 'the constructing nature of agency within structures (policies) and subcultures (faculty, staff, and academic parents)' (2015, p.153). Moreover, findings suggest that WLB is deeply entrenched in individual identity and connected to sociocultural family structures and gender roles, as the employee's circumstances – such as being ill or disabled, or caring for an ageing relative – and their role in the university – such as a pre-tenure, academic parent in a mostly male department, with a dual career partner – influence perceptions of organizational values around work–life. In sum, Lester's study shows that HEIs are unable to take into account the individuality of WLB when they 'create an encompassing culture that defines work–life balance and establishes uniform policies for the institution' (2015, p.142).

A third highlighted paper, Huppatz et al.'s study (2019) about academic mothering, centres on access to maternity leave and flexible work arrangements in a culture of new managerialism. The study suggests that gender equality and neoliberal thinking are mostly incompatible since 'gender equity policies are routinely undermined by the audit culture that works on a merit system that is conceptualized as gender-neutral but is essentially masculinist' (Huppatz et al., 2019, p. 785). Informed by Foucault's concepts of self-discipline and governmentality, the authors stress the discursive nature of power, and show that academic mothers are likely to exhibit post-feminist attitudes and become receptive to neoliberal practices of governance – such as the entrepreneurial disposition and self-responsibilization to be productive workers – because those practices appear as natural and individual.

One last article, by Smidt et al. (2017), focuses on the gendered implications for early-career academics of the processes by which WLB policies function under conditions influenced by underlying 'incentive mechanisms', which can be formal and/or based on neoliberal market governance (such as, a points-based evaluation system), informal (such as, peer pressure) or broader cultural norms (such as, patriarchy). Its authors not only show that formal, informal, overt, covert and cultural/social incentive mechanisms are 'all in place effectively to stop WLB policies from being adequately implemented altogether' (Smidt et al., 2017, pp.135–136), but also confirm findings from previous research demonstrating that 'academic flexibility is not just an option that (predominantly) women use for the sake of their families; it also becomes a way for them to amend broader social/cultural incentive mechanisms of gendered guilt connected to domestic responsibilities and the role of caregiver' (ibid.). Among the searched papers, this study stands out for taking a critical approach stressing that WLB makes individuals rather than structural inequalities responsible for social change. Even if it reduces the demands of private life to the role of caregiver, this study has the merit of proposing a WLB conceptual definition through a gender lens to the analysis of the contradictions between WLB policies and organizational practice that mean that those policies do 'no more than merely scratching the surface of deeply rooted gendered, neoliberal incentive mechanisms' (Smidt et al., 2017, p. 136). The authors add:

We define WLB as those instances *when organizational structures facilitate substantial time for involvement both at work and at home in a way that seeks to challenge existing gendered hierarchies in the organization and society more broadly*. (ibid., pp.126-127).

## Discussion and conclusion

As shown here, there is a rich literature about how university workers and students combine academic, familial and professional responsibilities. However, there is a paucity of research addressing work–life interface from a critical standpoint that discusses the gender mechanisms underlying the social construction of WLB conceptions and perceptions.

On the one hand, while literature shows a lack of awareness of WLB among university employees and the severe interference of WLC in their organizational outcomes, this review observed the concept of WLB to be unproblematized or defined according to the assumption that life demands are solely related to the care role in the context of family-life. Even when it is critically addressed and reformulated through a gender lens, *work–life* is equated generally to *work-family* interface; personal-life being reduced to family-life (caring for children and/or ageing parents). This approach fails to consider the web of demands of personal life, which go beyond the family with children and/or elders and include time for community responsibilities, self-initiated education focused on personal development, leisure and none-work-related interests, conjugal intimacy, friendship, doing voluntary work and political action. In other words, it does not account for the nature of work–life interface – which remains structured by a gendered division between paid and domestic work, underpinned by the male breadwinner norm and a top-down masculinist discourse that seeks to normalize high workloads and prime commitment to the university.

On the other hand, the dearth of research addressing work–life interface from a critical standpoint must be noted since gender-theoretically-informed studies mainly show that the pervasive neoliberal climate counteracts equity initiatives. The latter are routinely undermined by a merit system that is conceptualized as gender-neutral but is masculinist as shown in the following findings. Academic mothers spend significantly more time on childcare and less time on work activities than academic fathers do. Women display a postfeminist attitude by mobilizing a rhetoric of meritocracy, entrepreneurism, risk and personal choice, while postponing motherhood or depending on the support of grandparents, spouses or working colleagues without holding the university socially responsible for providing support. Academic organizational structures and culture hinder the involvement of academic fathers, who are unfamiliar with family-friendly policies. Work-family conflict has consequences throughout women's career as evidenced by the fact that full-time men are more likely to be on the tenure track than women, who are more likely to 'choose' part-time status to accommodate childcare than men are. Striving to meet conflicting expectations, female scholars build up multiple identities when communicating with their colleagues, superiors and extended family members. Female academics of colour face multiple marginalities and barriers to meet ideal-worker expectations. I highlight the fact there is a lack of literature applying intersectionality while being focused on diversity and intra-gender variations. Nonetheless, among the few authors who take an intersectional approach, some are more devoted to investigate how the different inequalities additively increase one's burden (Kachchaf et al., 2015), while others are more interested in disclosing how combining of identities produces substantively distinct experiences (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017).

The inequities presented here are likely to be amplified as research into COVID-19 observes its gendered consequences (Ausín, González-Sanguino, Castellanos, & Muñoz, 2020; Hennekam et al., 2020). During the pandemic more women lost their jobs and experienced work disruption because of increases in domestic work (Carli, 2020), and reported lower productivity and job satisfaction than men (Feng & Savani, 2020). Recent literature points to new trends among heterosexual parents: 'fathers do seem to be increasing the amount of time they spend in care and domestic work' and

'mothers spend much more of their paid-work hours simultaneously caring for children or their households' (Oleschuk, 2020, p. 509). While there is a lack of research documenting the work-family demands of academics in particular, Nash and Churchill's study on work–life support by Australian universities to academics during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that there may be opportunity for institutions to counteract the neoliberal trend, not merely amplify it through evading their responsibility to ensure women's full participation in the labour force. It observes that there is 'no agreed 'standard' or consistent pattern in the guidelines across [Australian] institutions on how academic employees are supposed to do their paid work and manage caring responsibilities in their private homes during COVID-19', and that most of the publicly available guidance was 'limited to discussing the situation with a supervisor or line manager or taking a period of leave' (Nash & Churchill, 2020, p. 842). As the authors outline, by suggesting that 'caring responsibilities are 'exceptional' circumstances, rather than what are more far-reaching circumstances affecting all academic workers' neoliberal institutional practices 'make gender inequalities like caring during COVID-19 invisible' (ibid.). Conversely, they suggest that Australian HEIs should follow the example of the world's top universities, as the latter do not individualize the issue of caring and make information about policies related to remote working and caring during COVID-19 transparent and publicly available.

Finally, I summarily propose an analytical framework informed by different strands of gender theory just before presenting suggested lines for future research. Drawing on the premise that gender is a cultural and dynamic construction *structuring* identity and social relations, and particularly *structured* by processes involving power that occur at both institutional and interaction levels, I contend that the main challenge for research on WLB in neoliberalsed academia is to expose the gendered conditions under which this 'balance' is defined and pursued at both individual and institutional levels. This challenge is greater amidst the pandemic. Social-distancing, quarantine, isolation and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and personal life particularly affected the most vulnerable individuals. More than ever there is a need to avoid defining (wo) men as monolithic groups and to apply intersectionality, so as to explore the cultural and institutional environment that contributes to discrimination and structures experiences of oppression and privilege. I suggest future research on WLB in academia to consider a two-fold strategy, which merges: (1) intersectionality observing intra-gender variations and work–life experiences resulting from the overlapping dynamics of different forms of inequality; and (2) a framework to investigate the interaction between the structural, the cultural and the political regarding WLC in academia that is, how job resources, working conditions, public policy, organizational cultures, workplace policies, care services and institutional governance impact on the individual's perception of what (s)he is entitled to claim as well as the scope of alternatives in exercising claims.

This review proposes seven recommendations that researchers may consider to address understudied gendered aspects of work–life interface in academia. First, to clarify gender and WLB concepts building up analytical frameworks informed by different strands of gender theory. Second, to further undertake qualitative research taking into account the different levels (national, institutional, individual) in which the processes that interfere with academics claiming rights to combine work and private life are founded. Third, to qualitatively examine individual experiences of scholars within different universities and in different countries. Fourth, to develop a comprehensive gender-sensitive framework providing an intersectional approach to the gendered structures of both paid work and personal life accounting for interaction of the multiple dimensions of individual identity and the systems of oppression shaping an individual's capacity for reflexivity and a sense of entitlement to claim rights (to be able to excel at both work and family life without penalty). Fifth, to further research academic men and fathers, recognizing the barriers they face in accessing work–life policies and services, as well as the needs of men who do not fit the hegemonic male norm. Sixth, to further investigate the differential work–life experiences of academic mothers and academic fathers, and the experiences of academics without children as well. Lastly, as academics, especially early-career academics, strive to combine work and private life with the help of their partners and grandparents, it is important to go beyond work organizations and investigate households and

family life and the generative potential of intersubjectivity (Rosa, 2018(a)) which foster equality or address new/complex forms of gender inequality.

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## Appendix 1. Frequency of articles by journals

| Journal title | Frequency |
| --- | --- |
| *European Educational Research Journal* | 7 |
| *Academic Medicine* | 5 |
| *Gender, Work and Organization; Journal of Diversity in Higher Education; Studies in Higher Education* | 4 |
| *Higher education; Journal of Athletic Training; Journal of Family Issues; Journal of Vocational Behaviour; Journal of Youth Studies;* | 3 |
| *Affilia; Feminism & Psychology; Feminismo/s; Gender and Education; Gender in Management; Higher Education Research & Development; Journal of Business and Psychology; Journal of Managerial Psychology; Psychological Reports; Research in Higher Education; Social Sciences & Humanities; The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher; The Career Development Quarterly; The Journal of Psychology* | 2 |
| *Academic Psychiatry; Active Learning in Higher Education; Advanced Science Letters; American Journal of Distance Education; Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources; Asian Nursing Research; Asian Population Studies; Australian Journal of Adult Learning; Breastfeeding Medicine; British Journal of Guidance & Counselling; Canadian Psychology; Connectist; Employee Relations; Engineering Studies; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; European Management Journal; Feminism & Psychology; Gender, Technology and Development; Higher Education Policy; Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning; Howard Journal of Communications; Human Relations; Humanomics; Industrial Relations Journal; Innovative Higher Education; International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health; International Journal of Happiness and Development; International Journal of Intercultural Relations; International Journal of Nursing Studies; International Journal of Occupational Safety and Ergonomics; International Journal of Stress Management; Journal of Applied Psychology; Journal of Clinical Nursing; Journal of Comparative Family Studies; Journal of Cultural Economy; Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism Education; Journal of Interdisciplinary Research; Journal of Management & Organization; Journal of Marriage and Family; Journal of Public Affairs Education; Journal of Social Service Research; Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice; Journal of Technical Education and Training; Journal of Workplace Behavioural Health; Leisure Sciences; Migration Letters; Oeconomia Copernicana; Personality and Individual Differences; Personnel Review; Policy Futures in Education; PSYCHOLOGICA; Psychology and Ageing; Psychology of Men & Masculinity; Psychology of Women Quarterly; Psicoperspectivas; Review of Religious Research; Revista Ciencias Estratégicas; Revista de Gestão e Secretariado; SA Journal of Human Resource Management; SAGE Open; Science and Public Policy; Sex Roles; Social Studies of Science; Sociological Forum; Sociological Spectrum; South African Journal of Science; South African Review of Sociology; South Asian Journal of Business Studies; Student Success; The Clinical Neuropsychologist; The International Journal of Human Resource Management; The Journal of Academic Librarianship; The Journal of Higher Education; The Psychologist-Manager Journal; The Social Science Journal; Work; Work, Employment and Society; Work & Stress* | 1 |