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Gender-Based Disparities in Academic Workload and Human Resource Utilisation: Evidence from Social Science Academics at the University of Jaffna

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Abstract

Gender equality in human resource utilisation remains a critical yet insufficiently addressed issue, particularly in many Asian countries. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms, socio-cultural traditions and economic structures continue to reinforce systemic gender disparities. Such inequalities are particularly evident in sectors such as education and healthcare, where women may experience unequal opportunities and disproportionate workloads despite possessing comparable qualifications and responsibilities. Institutional efficiency and productivity can be fully realised only when individuals, regardless of gender, are provided with equitable opportunities to perform their roles and exercise their rights. Against this background, this study examines gender equality in human resource utilisation, with particular emphasis on the distribution of academic workload among Social Science academics at the University of Jaffna. Although previous studies have identified the promotion and maintenance of gender equality within institutions as a persistent global challenge, empirical research specifically examining gender equality in human resource utilisation within Sri Lankan higher education remains limited. This study addresses this gap by analysing data collected from 65 academic staff members, comprising 31 males and 34 females, who responded to a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed among 100 academic staff members across 17 departments of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce at the University of Jaffna, yielding a response rate of 65%. The sample was selected using an appropriate sampling procedure based on established statistical techniques and sample-size determination methods. The study tested the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant gender difference in workload-based human resource utilisation. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted using SPSS to examine gender differences across selected workload dimensions. The results revealed a statistically significant gender difference in non-teaching contact hours ($t = 2.679$, $p = .009$) and overall academic workload ($t = 2.417$, $p = .019$). However, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in teaching contact hours, research hours or participation in statutory meetings. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected for the dimensions in which statistically significant differences were identified. The findings suggest that gender equality in workload-based human resource utilisation is not fully achieved among Social Science academics at the University of Jaffna. The study recommends the implementation of more equitable, transparent and gender-responsive workload allocation and human resource management practices within the university.

Keywords: Academic workload; gender equality; human resource utilisation; higher education; Social Sciences; University of Jaffna.

Introduction

Gender equality is widely recognised as both a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for sustainable development, economic growth and institutional excellence (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2018–2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015; World Health Organization [WHO], 2007). It encompasses the principle that individuals of all genders should have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities across all spheres of life (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1995).

Despite significant global advocacy and the development of policy frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality, inequalities continue to persist across various sectors, including higher education. Universities, which are often perceived as meritocratic institutions that promote diversity and critical thinking, remain influenced by gender biases that affect the professional trajectories of academic staff, particularly women (Ridgeway, 2011).

Traditional norms and cultural values exert a profound influence on gender dynamics within higher education institutions. These societal constructs often define and constrain gender roles, contributing to disparities in recruitment, promotion, leadership appointments and access to research funding (UNICEF, 2018–2021; Rosa & Clavero, 2022a). Although women's participation in academic professions has increased, their representation tends to decline at higher levels of the academic hierarchy, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the "leaky pipeline" (Rosa & Clavero, 2022a; Gunawardena, 2003a, 2003b).

Empirical research further suggests that although institutions may adopt formal gender equality policies, deeply rooted biases and opaque organisational cultures can undermine their effective implementation (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Rosa & Clavero, 2022b). Muhammad Ali (2016) argues that gender-focused human resource management (HRM) strategies can contribute to positive organisational outcomes but are often inconsistently implemented or inadequately integrated into core HR practices.

Human resource practices—including recruitment, retention, promotion and professional development represent important areas in which gender bias can either be mitigated or reinforced (Abdulkareem et al., 2011). Recruitment and promotion practices that do not adequately consider diversity and equity may unintentionally favour dominant groups, potentially disadvantaging women who may experience career interruptions because of caregiving responsibilities (Vithanage & Arachchige, 2020).

Leadership development and mentoring opportunities also play an important role in promoting gender equality within academia. However, women frequently encounter barriers to accessing mentoring opportunities and leadership positions (Chesterman et al., 2005; Kalinga & Kulawardena, 2024). The lack of institutional support can hinder career progression and contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership positions.

The "glass ceiling" remains a significant barrier within Sri Lankan higher education and is shaped by cultural, familial and institutional factors (Kalinga & Kulawardena, 2024). In addition, achieving work–life balance remains a major challenge for women academics, who may experience difficulties in managing professional and personal responsibilities simultaneously (Vithanage & Arachchige, 2020). Institutional initiatives, including the establishment of the Centre for Gender Equity/Equality (CGEE) by the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, seek to promote gender-sensitive institutional environments through policy initiatives and awareness programmes. Nevertheless, a gap between policy formulation and effective implementation remains to be addressed (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2024).

Globally, studies have emphasised the importance of strategic gender-focused HRM practices in promoting diversity and inclusion (Pandit & Paul, 2023), while other research highlights the need to

dismantle institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequalities (Manna, 2024; Ridgeway, 2011). Quantitative methods, including descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests, provide useful tools for examining gender differences in workload allocation (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020). Sampling techniques and sample-size determination procedures are also important in ensuring the reliability and representativeness of empirical findings (Israel, 2003; Yamane, 1967). At the same time, qualitative approaches can provide deeper insights into the lived experiences and perceptions underlying measurable gender disparities.

Accordingly, the present study examines gender-based disparities in academic workload and human resource utilisation among Social Science academics at the University of Jaffna. The University of Jaffna, one of Sri Lanka's oldest universities and a major centre for Social Science education, provides a relevant institutional context for examining gender differences in academic workload. Despite Jaffna's relatively strong educational attainment, substantial gender disparities persist in labour-force participation. According to the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey 2024, female labour-force participation in the Jaffna District was 18.0%, compared with 64.5% among males (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2024). This disparity highlights the importance of examining whether human resources are utilised equitably within academic institutions, particularly in relation to workload allocation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite national and institutional efforts to promote gender equality, disparities continue to exist within higher education institutions. Previous studies have shown that human resource management practices do not always succeed in equitably harnessing the full potential of available academic talent (Abdulkareem et al., 2011; Gunawardena, 2003a, 2003b).

Within the Social Science faculties of the University of Jaffna, questions remain regarding the extent to which academic workload and other human resource practices are distributed equitably between male and female academics. In addition, cultural expectations, family responsibilities and implicit institutional biases may influence women's professional experiences and career development (Kalinga & Kulawardena, 2024; Vithanage & Arachchige, 2020).

Therefore, the central research question guiding this study is:
To what extent do gender-based disparities exist in the distribution of academic workload and human resource utilisation among Social Science academics at the University of Jaffna?

By investigating this issue, the study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening gender-sensitive human resource policies and workload allocation practices within the University of Jaffna.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a deductive research strategy to systematically examine gender equality in workload-based human resource utilisation. The research began with a broader examination of macro-level issues and challenges relating to gender equality and subsequently focused on the experiences and perceptions of academics in the Social Sciences at the University of Jaffna. This approach enabled the study to examine how broader principles of gender equality are reflected in the allocation and utilisation of academic workload at the institutional level.

Data Collection Methods

A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from academic staff. The questionnaire focused on key dimensions of academic workload and human resource utilisation, including teaching contact hours, non-teaching academic activities, research activities and participation in statutory meetings. The questionnaire was distributed electronically using Google Forms. Ethical considerations were addressed prior to data collection, including informed consent, anonymity and voluntary participation.

Sampling Procedure

A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to ensure representation across gender and departmental affiliations. Stratified sampling is particularly appropriate for studies examining social disparities because it facilitates the representation of relevant subgroups within the population (Kothari, 1990).

The questionnaire was distributed among 100 academic staff members across 17 departments of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce. A total of 65 completed responses were obtained, comprising 31 male and 34 female respondents, resulting in a response rate of 65%.

A pilot study involving 10 participants was conducted to assess the clarity, reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire. Minor revisions were made following the pilot study.

Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the research instrument were assessed to ensure the accuracy, consistency and credibility of the data collected. Content validity was established by developing the questionnaire based on relevant literature, previous empirical studies and the conceptual framework of the study. The instrument was also reviewed by academics with relevant expertise to ensure that the items adequately represented the dimensions of gender equality and workload-based human resource utilisation.
Construct validity was considered by ensuring that the questionnaire items appropriately reflected the underlying constructs examined in the study.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The analysis was conducted using SPSS to determine the internal consistency of the items measuring each construct. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or above was considered indicative of acceptable internal consistency. The results indicated that the measurement items demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability and were therefore suitable for subsequent statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarise the workload characteristics of male and female academic staff. Independent-samples *t*-tests were subsequently conducted using SPSS to determine whether statistically significant gender differences existed across the selected workload dimensions. Levene's test for equality of variances was used to assess the homogeneity of variance assumption. Where the assumption was not satisfied, the results from the "Equal variances not assumed" row were considered.

Results

Table 1. Statistical Summary of Human Resource Utilisation by Gender

No.	Engagement activity	Sex	N	Mean	SD	SE
1	Students' contact hours for teaching	Male	31	123.40	25.58	4.59
		Female	34	118.72	29.20	5.00
2	Contact hours for non-teaching tasks (e.g., research, supervision and consultancy)	Male	31	145.90	46.39	8.33
		Female	34	114.13	48.94	8.39
3	Hours spent on research activities	Male	31	154.82	46.53	8.30
		Female	34	136.13	53.59	9.19
4	Hours spent attending statutory body meetings	Male	31	85.08	22.85	4.10
		Female	34	78.70	24.22	4.15

Table 2. Independent-Samples t-Test Results for Human Resource Utilisation

Activity	Levene's F	Sig.	*t*	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Teaching contact hours	0.020	0.889	0.685	63.00	0.496
Teaching contact hours – unequal variances	—	—	0.689	62.91	0.493
Non-teaching contact hours	1.091	0.300	2.679	63.00	0.009
Non-teaching contact hours – unequal variances	—	—	2.686	62.89	0.009
Research hours	0.828	0.366	1.495	63.00	0.140
Research hours – unequal variances	—	—	1.504	62.86	0.137
Statutory meetings	0.450	0.832	1.088	63.00	0.281
Statutory meetings – unequal variances	—	—	1.091	62.92	0.279
Academic load	0.967	0.329	2.417	63.00	0.019
Academic load – unequal variances	—	—	2.419	62.56	0.019

Hypothesis Testing

To determine whether gender-based disparities existed in workload-based human resource utilisation among academic staff, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Null hypothesis (H_0): There is no statistically significant gender difference in workload-based human resource utilisation among academic staff.

$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is a statistically significant gender difference in workload-based human resource utilisation among academic staff.

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$

Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in academic workload. Levene's test was first used to assess the equality of variances.

The results indicate that there was a statistically significant gender difference in non-teaching contact hours, including activities such as research supervision and consultancy services ($t = 2.679$, $p = .009$).

Male academics reported a higher mean number of hours devoted to non-teaching activities (M = 145.90, SD = 46.39) than female academics (M = 114.13, SD = 48.94).

A statistically significant difference was also observed in overall academic workload ($t = 2.417$, $p = .019$). Accordingly, the null hypothesis was rejected for these dimensions.

However, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in teaching contact hours ($p = .496$), research hours ($p = .140$) or participation in statutory meetings ($p = .281$).

Interpretation of Findings

The findings reveal several important patterns concerning gender-based disparities in human resource utilisation among academic staff at the University of Jaffna.

Non-Teaching Academic Engagement

A statistically significant gender difference was observed in the number of hours devoted to non-teaching academic activities, including research supervision and consultancy services. Male academics reported substantially higher levels of engagement in these activities than female academics. This finding is consistent with Barrett and Barrett (2011), who found that workload allocation practices can disadvantage women academics when competing responsibilities constrain the time available for research activities. They further highlighted that research is particularly important for academic career progression and advancement. Therefore, the lower level of engagement of female academics in non-teaching academic activities observed in the present study may have potential implications for their research productivity, professional visibility and opportunities for career progression. This finding may indicate differences in the allocation of professional responsibilities and opportunities, although the present study cannot establish the underlying causes of this disparity.

Teaching and Statutory Meetings

No statistically significant gender differences were found in teaching contact hours or participation in statutory meetings. This suggests that the allocation of these core institutional responsibilities was relatively comparable between male and female academics at the University of Jaffna. This finding can be considered in relation to Steinþórsdóttir et al. (2021), who emphasised that academic workload allocation encompasses multiple forms of work, including teaching, research and institutional service, and that the distribution of these responsibilities can have important implications for academics' capacity to undertake other career-enhancing activities. Their study further highlighted that apparently neutral workload allocation practices may produce gendered outcomes when different forms of academic work are not equally recognised or valued. Therefore, although the present study did not identify a statistically significant gender difference in teaching contact hours or participation in statutory meetings, equality in these specific workload components does not necessarily indicate equality in the overall distribution of academic work or access to activities that support career progression. This interpretation is particularly relevant given that the present study identified a statistically significant gender difference in overall academic workload. Supporting this broader perspective, Allen et al. (2023) found that male and female

academics reported broadly similar total working hours, but the distribution of time across research, teaching and university service differed by gender, with men spending more time on research and women spending more time on teaching and service. Similarly, Guarino and Borden (2017) found that female faculty members undertook significantly more university service than their male counterparts, even after accounting for academic rank, race/ethnicity and disciplinary field. These findings suggest that gender equality in academic workload should be assessed not only by comparing the number of hours allocated to particular responsibilities but also by examining the type, distribution, recognition and career value of the work undertaken. Accordingly, the absence of a significant gender difference in teaching contact hours and statutory meetings at the University of Jaffna should be interpreted alongside the significant difference observed in overall workload and non-teaching academic engagement.

Overall Academic Workload

A statistically significant gender difference was observed in overall academic workload ($t = 2.417$, $p = .019$). This finding indicates that gender disparities may extend beyond individual workload components and may reflect differences in the overall allocation of academic responsibilities.

Steinþórsdóttir et al. (2021) similarly highlighted the gendered nature of workload allocation in universities, particularly in relation to teaching and institutional service responsibilities. Unequal workload allocation may have implications for career progression because time devoted to teaching, service, supervision and mentoring may reduce the time available for research activities that are often highly valued in academic promotion systems.

Implications

The findings indicate that, although teaching responsibilities and participation in statutory meetings appear relatively balanced, significant gender disparities exist in non-teaching activities and overall academic workload. These disparities warrant greater institutional attention to ensure that academic responsibilities and professional opportunities are allocated fairly and transparently.

At the same time, quantitative workload indicators alone may not fully capture the complex nature of gender relations within academia. Differences in access to informal networks, mentoring, leadership opportunities, research resources and professional recognition may also contribute to gender inequality.

Conclusion

This study examined gender-based disparities in academic workload and human resource utilisation among Social Science academics at the University of Jaffna. The findings demonstrate that gender differences are not evident across all dimensions of academic workload. Teaching contact hours, research hours and participation in statutory meetings did not show statistically significant gender differences. However, statistically significant differences were identified in non-teaching academic activities and overall academic workload.

These findings suggest that gender equality in workload-based human resource utilisation has not been fully achieved. Although formal institutional policies may provide equal rights and responsibilities to male and female academics, differences in actual workload allocation may persist.

The findings therefore highlight the need for the university to move beyond formal commitments to gender equality and strengthen transparent, evidence-based and gender-responsive workload allocation mechanisms. Regular monitoring of workload distribution could help identify disparities and ensure that academic responsibilities and professional opportunities are allocated equitably.

Key Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Establish structured mentoring programmes** to support the career advancement of female academics, particularly in research, leadership and professional development.
2. **Introduce transparent and gender-sensitive workload allocation criteria** that clearly define expectations relating to teaching, research, supervision, consultancy, administration and institutional service.
3. **Strengthen transparency in performance evaluation and promotion** by recognising the full range of academic contributions, including teaching, research, supervision, service and community engagement.
4. **Increase women's participation in leadership and decision-making positions** and promote balanced representation in university governance structures.
5. **Conduct regular gender audits of academic workload** to identify disparities and support evidence-based institutional interventions.
6. **Promote work–life balance policies** that recognise caregiving responsibilities and provide appropriate flexible working arrangements where feasible.
7. **Monitor access to professional opportunities**, including research projects, consultancy assignments, conference participation, supervision opportunities and leadership responsibilities.

Future Research

Future research should incorporate qualitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews, focus groups and narrative inquiry, to explore the lived experiences of male and female academics. Such approaches could provide deeper insights into the institutional, cultural and social factors underlying observed workload differences.

Longitudinal studies could also examine whether gender-based workload disparities change over time and whether institutional interventions lead to measurable improvements in gender equality. Comparative studies involving different faculties and universities in Sri Lanka would further strengthen the generalisability of the findings.

Final Reflection

Achieving genuine gender equality in higher education is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for institutional excellence. Equitable academic environments can contribute to improved staff well-being, greater productivity, innovation and sustainable institutional development. Meaningful progress requires continuous assessment, transparent workload allocation, inclusive policy-making and sustained institutional commitment to addressing both visible and less visible forms of gender disparity.

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