



PROFESSORS  
WITHOUT  
BORDERS

# IMPROVING WOMEN'S RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CONFERENCE REPORT



# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION - 1

PANEL 1. Female Student Retention In Higher Education - 2

PANEL 1. Q&A - 4

PANEL 2. Female Faculty Retention In Higher Education - 6

PANEL 2. Q&A - 8

CONCLUSION -11

This report was peer reviewed by Dr. Caroline Varin and Theresa Cariola

# INTRODUCTION

On 27th March 2021, Professors Without Borders held the online conference 'Improving Women's Retention in Higher Education.'

The goal of this conference was to discuss the unique barriers that face women in higher education settings. The first panel focused on the student side. The panelists discussed the various obstacles to female students including lack of funding and mentorship, socioeconomic status, and societal attitudes towards women in higher education. The second panel focused on the faculty side. The panelists discussed the importance of the recruitment process for women, which is often male dominated. They also pointed out that leadership skills in higher education are often lacking for women, as focusing on women as leaders is generally not taught at a young age and can have lifelong consequences.

# PANEL 1. FEMALE STUDENT RETENTION

Panel 1 was moderated by Rachel Warnick, trustee for Professors Without Borders. The objective of this panel was to identify barriers to female student retention and offer solutions.

Ren-Neasha Blake, a second year doctoral student from St Mary, Jamaica explained that the main obstacle women face when pursuing higher education is the lack of funding and mentorship. She spoke about how growing up, she had little access to the guidance and money required to study law, and that although she eventually received financial support through student loans, she struggled to find guarantors for months. She also noted that her male peers seemed to be offered more scholarships and academic opportunities, which made her feel stifled and held back. She still faces barriers to success, including student loan debt.

Dr Meenakshi Narain, who holds a PhD in physics and teaches at Brown University in Rhode Island, USA, elaborated on the points made by Ren-Neasha. She discussed the role that elitism plays in restricting access to higher education. Disadvantaged groups, including women, face more challenges when pursuing higher education, as they are often forced into the role of caretaker or forced to work to look after their families, which limits their opportunities and achievements. She stated that educational institutions should make it easier for women to access funding.

Educational institutions should take into account factors that are not based on luck or privilege when deciding who to accept, as these do not affect applicants' intelligence or capabilities. Dr. Narain concluded by highlighting the difference in funding allocated for scientific research between male and female researchers, as male students are often favoured over females.



Rashi Yadav, a law student in New Delhi, India, spoke about the importance of socioeconomic and cultural factors in determining whether women are able to access higher education. In developing countries, women's social status combined with economic difficulties create challenges specific to women. In low-income households, parents often favour sending male children to school over female children, because they believe it is more practical to invest in males. Meanwhile, middle and upper middle class women, although not as restricted by economic difficulties, are often overlooked because their families do not perceive female education to be as necessary as male education. She concluded by explaining that female-centric scholarship programmes would incentivise families to invest more in their daughters and be more willing to send them to school.

Ren-Neasha followed this by discussing the role that systemic issues play in restricting access to higher education, and stated that in order to create more opportunities for women we need to change the structure of educational institutions. Unless the mostly male leaders of these organisations commit to promoting diversity and inclusion, women will continue to face unfair challenges when trying to enter academia. She went on to say that, along with showing the benefits of educating women and emphasising that they are just as capable as men, addressing systemic issues will be a major help in increasing the proportion of women in higher education, but that it will be very difficult without the support of male allies who can advocate for female education in spaces which women currently struggle to access.

When asked about how we can show the benefits of female education to the leaders of these institutions, Dr Narain described two effective ways of drawing said leaders' attention to female students' struggles: continue conversations going outside of official meetings, and being prepared with the data, which they find much harder to ignore. For example, although the ratio of computer science students is evenly split between males and females, the number of male graduates far outweighs female graduates. Dr Narain also emphasised the importance of equal teaching methods, as teachers who treat male and female students differently can discourage females from finishing their studies. We should also attempt to make female students feel more comfortable in peer-to-peer interactions by putting students in groups which are equally split or predominantly female, so that their interactions are not entirely male-dominated. We should also ensure we have solutions ready so that leaders do not fail to act out of ignorance.

# PANEL 1. Q&A

**Q: What do you think universities can do to create a more welcoming environment for female students, considering that classrooms are often male- dominated?**

A: Rashi Yadav started by describing the effects of gender stereotypes and social and cultural barriers that women face. For example, women are more inclined to enrol in courses that are deemed suitable for them, predominantly teaching and the arts. She then spoke about the importance of increasing the number of female professors in universities, as there is a positive correlation between female student retention and the number of female faculty members. The number of female professors is significantly less than the number of male professors, and by closing the gap we can provide role models for female students, particularly in overwhelmingly male STEM fields. Rashi believes things are improving, but not fast enough, as evidenced by the number of women who are pulled out of university by their families compared to the number of men.

**Q: [To Ren-Neasha Blake] How do we ensure we are building a more equal gender composition in the faculty, especially since many women leave academia to have children or work part-time?**

A: Ren-Neasha emphasised how important it is to show women that having a successful career and having a family are not mutually exclusive. She suggested that we do this by creating networks which connect women with others like them and provide role models to show that they do not need to give up their education to have children.. In order to accomplish this goal we need to create a space to show that other women are already doing this and implement support systems for mothers, such as creating day-cares within universities.

**Q: Following from this, when we look at disciplines that are male-dominated, women who are in these disciplines can face explicit and implicit bullying, so how do you suggest we combat this?**

A: Dr Narain promoted creating more inclusive learning environments by trying to engage all students in the conversation and treating them all equally. She spoke about the impact that professors can have on peer-to-peer interactions, mentioning how male professors are often reluctant to ask their female students questions, which creates the illusion that women are not as competent as men and makes male students believe they are superior to their female classmates. Consequently, their social and study groups exclude women, which creates a hostile environment that makes women feel unwelcome. By fostering communities of diverse, educated women we can make students feel more comfortable and give them a sense of belonging.

**Q: [To Rashi Yadav] How do you see us overcoming what are deeply entrenched patriarchal notions?**

A: Rashi advocated for grassroots-level improvements and interventions, as the cultural norms and societal expectations placed upon women are some of the most significant barriers they face, and that they make women feel they are not good enough to pursue higher education. To do this, we need to show local families the benefits of sending women to university, as the patriarchal societies they live in make them see female education as unnecessary, so instead push women into domestic roles.

# PANEL 2. FEMALE FACULTY RETENTION

Panel 2 was moderated by Jacqueline Akello, who is based in Uganda and has years of experience in higher education. She has worked with two start-up universities including African Rural University, where Professors Without Borders has taught three summer schools.

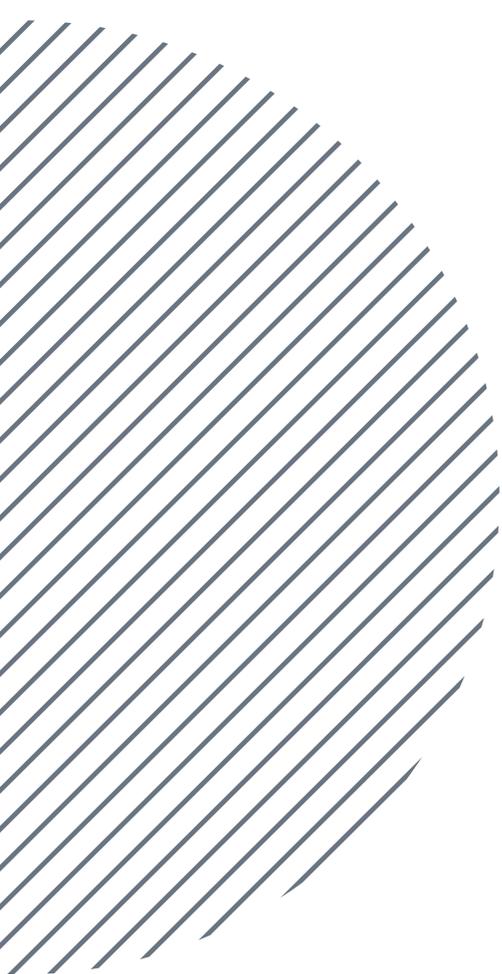
Viviana Meschitti spoke about how the recruitment and promotion of women, not just retention, is crucial. Many studies have shown that women are less likely to be promoted, even when they are just as productive as their male colleagues, and this disparity is present across all disciplines (although more noticeable in some than others). She advocated for greater transparency in the criteria for promotion and recruitment, as they can be difficult to find out and prevent people from being promoted. She also mentioned the difference between job interviews in Italy and the United Kingdom: in the former, interviews are much more public and transparent, whereas in the UK it can be hard to find out what interviewees are being asked and whether any bias is present.

She concluded by noting the importance of policies that help people create healthy work-life balances and manage their workloads, but also said that anything that promotes diversity and inclusion will be a positive step.

Dr Tezel advocated for more transparency when interviewing people: for example, ensuring all applicants are asked the same questions and that women aren't the only ones asked about their home lives.

She also discussed the importance of having selection committees that are evenly split between males and females, so that one woman isn't representing all female candidates. This issue is also present in meetings, especially technical ones, where men usually far outnumber women and make it challenging for women to be listened to. In conclusion, we need more women in upper management.

Dr Meena Rajesh then spoke about how women often aren't taught leadership qualities in primary and secondary education, because they aren't given the same opportunities as men. This leads women to believe they aren't fit for leadership positions, so there are fewer women in powerful positions. Unfortunately, organisations often fail to help women achieve this, which needs to be addressed immediately.



## PANEL 2. Q&A

**Q:** [To Viviana Meschitti] There's some very interesting research from the University of California, where they discovered that 50% of PhD holders were women, but only 31% were tenured professors. What are your thoughts on this statistic?

**A:** Viviana Meschitti discussed how this issue is present worldwide, and that it is common for the number of female faculty members to be disproportionate to the number of women getting PhDs. She also highlighted how difficult it can be to enter academia, even after postdoc and especially if someone can't find a sponsor. There are also cultural factors at play: for example, mobility is strongly promoted. She said that it is important to use data monitoring and mentoring to alleviate the problem, and we should organise events to promote female intelligence and education, as well as avoiding all-male panels in general.

Dr Tezel also emphasised the importance of mentoring, and of having different mentors for different aspects of people's careers. She talked about the advantages and disadvantages of academia, a major advantage being that people can organise their schedules around their lives, allowing for a better work-life balance; however, a disadvantage is that professors often have lots of work placed upon them, which can make it difficult to balance. She talked about the effect of academia on work-life balance, a positive effect being the flexibility of professors' schedules but a disadvantage being the amount of work professors are expected to do. She advocated for introducing daycares into educational institutions so that faculty find it easier to manage their work. She concluded by emphasising the importance of having female members of selection committees and more female leaders, as diverse organisations tend to be more successful than less diverse ones.

Dr Rajesh talked about the impact of cultural factors on academia. Many women are prevented from pursuing academic careers because of their domestic obligations, which leads to much research being male-dominated. People are also expected to give back to their families if they have received an education, and because of this expectation many women are unable to participate in research.

**Q: [To Dr Tezel] How do you think we can increase the number of female professors in academia?**

**A:** Dr Tezel emphasised the importance of creating evenly split selection committees, as often they are mostly or entirely male. This leads to fewer female applicants being considered for a job. She also mentioned the importance of promoting careers which have fewer women to encourage girls to pursue traditionally male-dominated fields. An example she gave is the increase in the number of female engineering students, which then reduced once we stopped promoting them.

**Q: [To Meena Rajesh] Would you say it has been easier to implement policies that promote women now that you are in a higher position?**

**A:** Dr Rajesh discussed the effects of culture on the women's priorities and aspirations. In India, many women do not hold their careers as their number one priority. She recommended that interviewers do not ask candidates about whether they plan to get married or have children, as the expectation that women should stay at home leads to them being discouraged from applying to jobs if they believe their home lives will be a barrier to success. She also described how GH Rasoni University offers an orientation to all staff and tries to give them a sense of security that their home lives won't affect their employment.

**Q: [To Viviana Meschitti] Do you often see women who have to choose between having a family and having a career?**

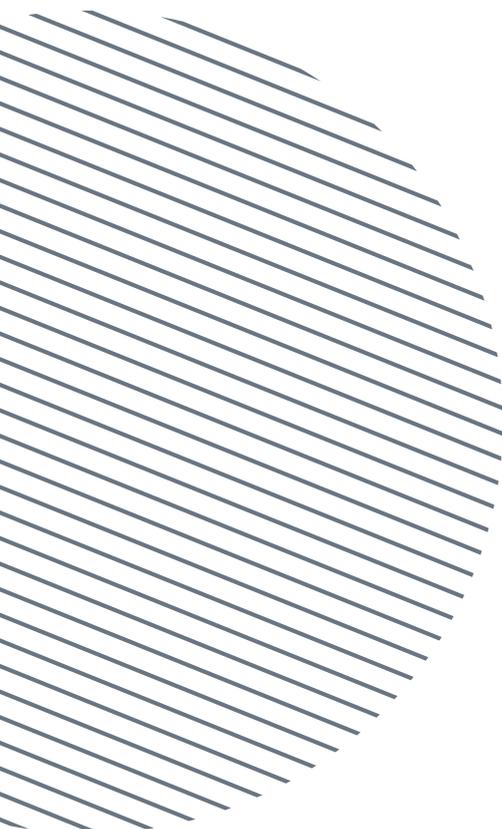
**A:** Viviana agreed that it is a major barrier for women, and that she noticed women were often thinking about what they would do if they had children, even if they didn't intend to at the time, and planning ahead where men rarely did. She talked about the studies showing that the proportion of housework that men and women do is about the same before having children, but that afterwards women usually do a much greater amount of work. She also noted the effects of omitting gender from application forms, as when it is included men are usually favoured over women. She finished by saying that she thought we should make applications for funding gender-blind

**Q: [To Dr Tezel] How do you encourage women to continue in academia when it is difficult to create a good work-life balance?**

A: Dr Tezel emphasised the importance of making academia an attractive career for women, as all students should enjoy what they are learning about. She said we should have more women in prominent leadership positions and make it easier for people to create a good work-life balance by including features such as daycare and gyms at universities. This encourages people to continue with their careers because they can look after their families at the same time.

**Q: [To Dr Rajesh] Have you done anything to combat the stigma attached to medical and parental leave?**

A: Dr Rajesh spoke about how women often don't disclose the problems they are facing, especially in the private sector where they could easily lose their jobs. In the university setting, staff are allowed to take a break if they have medical issues and rejoin a year later. She emphasised the importance of showing women that they can enter higher education and be successful so they are more confident, as well as the importance of monitoring individual and group behaviour to help combat the reluctance of many female faculty members to share their problems.



# CONCLUSION

**In conclusion, women's retention in higher education involves several factors, many of which stem from the attitudes women face in childhood.**

There needs to be more equity in the education system for young students in terms of what subjects they are encouraged to pursue and whether or not they are encouraged to continue education. Socio-economic factors that keep women out of school and in the home are one of the main reasons why women often do not pursue, or do not finish higher education. Additionally, cultural attitudes are extremely important in breaking down the barriers to higher education for women. Women faculty members in higher education are important role models for young students. Recruitment and promotion of women is key in retraining women faculty members.

Many women struggle with work- life balance and the decision to focus on family or career, which comes back to the patriarchal society which places the responsibility on women to be the primary caretakers at home. Higher education institutions must put more emphasis on the unique and individual challenges of women, and make steps toward addressing them.