Wayne State University
Gender Equity Advances Retention in STEM
### *Drives • Shifts • Accelerates*

Women faculty report lack of support to address work/family/life strains
A WSU-GEARS mini brief

Understanding the ways that Wayne State University can better respond to work-family-life strains is a priority of the NSF WSU-GEARS grant. Work-family conflict occurs as the result of incompatibility between work demands and family/life responsibilities (e.g., caregiving or housework). The NSF WSU-GEARS program found gender and rank disparities in work/family/life strains when we surveyed faculty in 2021, highlighted in focus groups with 29 women faculty. Faculty described a lack of consistent leadership and support for women and variation among chairs with respect to policy implementation.

Key Themes and Takeaways

### 1) Women Faculty Report More Work/Family/Life Conflict
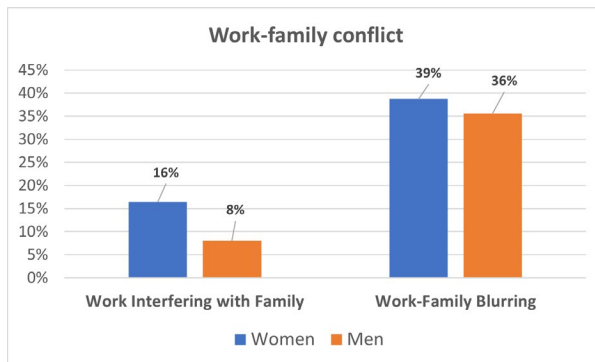
First, we observed gender disparities in the ways that women faculty experience strains while managing work and family roles. Women faculty reported higher levels of work family conflict; 16% of women had high work-family-life conflict as opposed to 8% of men. Additional strains were observed from work-family blurring: high levels of work-related interference with their nonwork lives, a blurring between work and non-work, and disruption of non-work activities due to work-related factors.
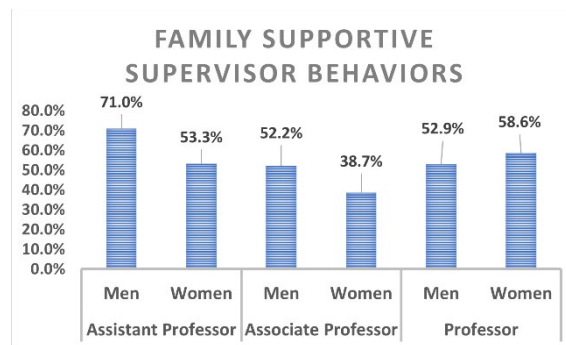
In the focus groups, women faculty described variation in the ways that family leave and related policies had been implemented. They expressed frustration and anger about the type and quantity of leave available, confusion over university policies, dissatisfaction with limited on-campus childcare options, and fatigue with the process. One full professor summed up the gender disparities in this way: "I don't think that as an institution Wayne State understands that caregiving still primarily falls on the mother." Reflecting on recent years, they continued: "Being a parent became much harder when the pandemic hit. I don't think my unit has had any understanding of how hard the pandemic hit parents."

2) Lack of Leadership and Chair Variability

Women indicated lower perceptions of support from the department and its leaders for family-related and other non-work obligations. Whereas 60% of men faculty reported feeling supported by their supervisors (e.g., department chair), 51% of women faculty said the same. And while 47% of men faculty perceived the university as accommodating, 43% of women faculty had a similar experience. A minority of *both* men and women faculty reported a positive perception of the institution as supporting family roles. There were disparities by rank. Women assistant and associate professors reported less support
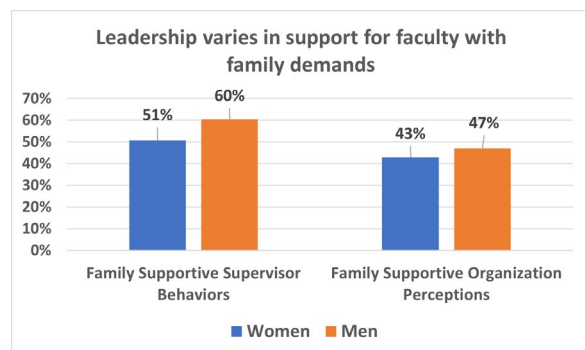
from leadership. Assistant and associate women professors reported lower perceptions of support from their supervisors for family and other non-work demands, when compared to their male colleagues, with the greatest disparity (17 points) between women and men at the assistant professor level.

FAMILY SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISOR BEHAVIORS

	Assistant Professor		Associate Professor		Professor	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
%	71.0%	53.3%	52.2%	38.7%	52.9%	58.6%

Women faculty in the focus groups described a wide variety in the knowledge that chairs had of family leave and related policies, and in the ways that policies had been implemented. Faculty explained that chair variability can impact the how policies are carried out. An assistant professor told us that even with new leadership in her academic unit, faculty remained unsure about how leave policies would be implemented. "Things seem to have potentially changed since the prior chair and so I think there's a lot of murkiness at the department level of how you go about the formal process of getting time off or utilizing, capitalizing on these resources that are meant to promote family/work balance."

Women faculty who had taken family leave expressed confusion about the different ways that departments treated modified duties and reduced courseloads around family leave. An assistant professor said that a faculty colleague decided to return to teaching six weeks after she had her baby because the chair had asked the colleague to pay the adjunct teaching her class, stating, "So if your chair is that person, and I still think our policies would allow that, that's a problem."

Faculty told us that university leaders could do more to model healthy work/family/life balance. "I would actually look to see more from leadership about taking mental health days, taking weekend vacations, spending the evenings doing a hobby or spending time with your family," said an Associate professor. They continued: "This is just a job. It might be a job we feel passionate about, but it's a job at the end of the day. And we are not obligated to work this job 60 hours a week, or 80 hours a week."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Improving university work/family/life supports, policies, and accommodations (e.g., leave policy; childcare) can help recruitment and retention in higher education. Morgan et al. (2021)[1] find that 45% of women cited family leave policies as an important factor in choosing their current university position, while only 20% of male faculty said the same. Gabriel et al. (2023:187)[2] point to two groups in particular—department heads and colleagues— "in a critical position to enact support and change." Department heads can exercise greater discretion to close the gap between policy and reality and colleagues can serve as stronger allies and advocates for women, while recognizing racial/ethnic and other identities may intersect to create different needs/supports. Departments with a diversity plan tend to be more knowledgeable about family policies.[3] Gabriel et al. (2023:198)[2] further argue that collectively, family-friendly policies and practices "can enhance faculty productivity, increase retention, foster positive attitudes toward the institution, and instill perceptions of support for work-family."

[1] Morgan, A.C., Way, S.F., Hoefer, Michael J.D., Larremore, D.B., Galesic, M., and Clauset, A. (2021). The unequal impact of parenthood in academia. *Science Advances*,.7,9. DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.abd1996.

[2] Gabriel, A., Allen, T., Devers, C., Eby, L., Gilson, L., Hebl, M., . . . Rosen, C. (2023:187). A call to action: Taking the untenable out of women professors' pregnancy, postpartum, and caregiving demands. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 16,2, 187-210. http://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2022.111.

[3] Su, X., and Bozeman, B. (2016). Family Friendly Policies in STEM Departments: Awareness and Determinants. *Research in Higher Education* 57, 990–1009. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-016-9412-4.