

# Chilly Climate 2.0: Women's Experiences of Harassment and Discrimination in Canadian Higher Education

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## Abstract

This research examines the extent to which issues identified in *Breaking Anonymity* (The Chilly Collective, 1995) are still salient despite new EDI mandates/programs which support increased research excellence through EDI principles. We present survey results for Canadian academics who identify as women ( $n = 244$ ) regarding their experiences with gender-based harassment and discrimination. Our analysis identified three categories of patriarchal gendered control: (1) overt practices, (2) covert practices, and (3) a systematic effort to silence the reporting of these experiences. We highlight the voices of women academics as they provide personal insights into the continuing barriers through their experiences. Through their stories, the implications of existing overt and covert harassment and discrimination practices are discussed. Our study provides an overview of women academics' experiences with oppression by their male colleagues and contributes to research exploring equity and inclusion in higher education and the continued need to work toward gender equity.

*Keywords:* gender, discrimination, harassment, chilly climate, academia

## Résumé

Cette recherche examine dans quelle mesure les questions identifiées dans *Breaking Anonymity* (The Chilly Collective, 1995) sont toujours d'actualité malgré les nouveaux mandats/programmes d'ÉDI (équité, diversité et inclusion) qui soutiennent l'excellence accrue de la recherche grâce aux principes de l'ÉDI. Nous présentons les résultats d'une enquête menée auprès d'universitaires canadiennes qui s'identifient comme des femmes ( $n = 244$ ) concernant leurs expériences en matière de harcèlement et de discrimination basés sur le genre. Notre analyse a permis d'identifier trois catégories de contrôle patriarcal genré : 1) des pratiques manifestes ; 2) des pratiques cachées ; et 3) un effort systématique pour faire taire la divulgation de ces expériences. Nous soulignons les voix des femmes universitaires qui, à travers leurs expériences personnelles, donnent un aperçu des obstacles qui subsistent. À travers leurs récits, les implications des pratiques de harcèlement et de discriminations manifestes et cachées sont discutées. Notre étude donne un résumé des

expériences des femmes universitaires en matière d’oppression par leurs collègues de sexe masculin et contribue à la recherche sur l’équité et l’inclusion à l’enseignement supérieur et sur la nécessité de continuer à travailler en faveur de l’équité des sexes.

*Mots-clés* : genre, discrimination, harcèlement, ambiance tendue, milieu universitaire.

## Introduction

Almost 30 years ago, a group of women academics examined the environmental factors contributing to gender inequality in academia (The Chilly Collective, 1995). They found that women across university faculties often experienced overt and subtle forms of harassing and discriminatory practices which made them feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, and devalued. Despite the myriad equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and commitments launched over the past decade in higher education in Canada (for an expansive review see Universities Canada, 2019), the “chilling” effect (Sandler, 1986) described by these authors appears to be enduring. Recent data reports that 34% of women report harassment and discrimination in their employment at post-secondary institutions (cf. 22% of men; Hango, 2021). Incidences of harassment and discrimination in higher education were found to be more than most other workplace settings (Hango & Moyser, 2018).

In light of the recent data, this research sought to contextualise the chilling effect for women academics through their own stories and in their own voices. The questions guiding our work include: (1) What are the experiences of women in Canadian universities? and (2) What is the personal and career impact of these experiences on women? Our results point to a strong presence of both covert and overt behaviours and an increasing pressure on what is referred to as the “proving process.” In particular, the distinction between covert and overt behaviours related to gender-based harassment and/or discrimination (GBHD) is an important contribution to the existing literature.

It is critically important to continue to tell these stories and to keep raising the question of why these experiences persist for academics who identify as women, as well as the compounding impacts experienced by racialized women, despite the expansive EDI commitments across the higher education sector in Canada. These enduring unsafe work contexts make it crucial to continue to give voice to these gendered and racialized experiences in academia in the hopes that the echo might push forward necessary change.

It is hoped that this article will spark further discussion on the lived experiences of women academics in a system that refuses to acknowledge the inherent biases of the very institutional structures on which recent EDI measures have been placed.

## Literature Review

Gender-based harassment and/or discrimination (GBHD) can be overt and a conscious act by the perpetrator, but more commonly it is subtle, pervasive (Berdahl, 2007), and covert (Scott, 2018, 2022). At times the perpetrator may use implicit (unconscious, misunderstood, or hidden) bias (Dresden, Dresden, & Ridge, 2018; Dresden, Dresden, Ridge, & Yamawaki, 2018; Handley et al., 2015). It is this less obvious behaviour that can make academia particularly “chilly” for women and other underrepresented people (O’Meara & Stromquist, 2015; Settles et al., 2012; Zambrana et al., 2017). In traditionally male-dominated work environments, such as academia, the mistreatment of women is prevalent (Berdahl, 2007; de Haas & Timmerman, 2010; Hango, 2018; Hango & Moyser, 2021; Misra et al., 2011; Settles et al., 2012). Research suggests that the inhospitable climate appears to be the result of structural inequity related to: (a) implicit bias (Chapman et al., 2013); (b) scholarly and gendered alienation (Settles et al., 2012); (c) isolation for women in academia (Rogus-Pulia et al., 2018); (d) burdens related to the “proving process,” whereby women academics work extra hard to demonstrate the worthiness of their place in the academy (Griffin et al., 2011); (e) the “fixing process,” where women are expected to find solutions to historic underrepresentation (Ahmed, 2014; McClelland & Holland, 2015); and (f) tokenism. There is evidence to suggest that intersectional identities may exacerbate these challenges (Acker & Muzzin, 2019; Armstrong & Jovanovic, 2015).

## Implicit Bias

Implicit bias begins early in childhood and is reinforced through social stereotypes. According to Chapman et al. (2013), it is an unintentional and unacknowledged preference for one group over another and it can result in pervasive disadvantages by marginalized groups (i.e., women, racialized others, etc.). Implicit bias can lead to decisions and judgments that are based on erroneous beliefs and it systematically constrains women (Filut et al., 2017) and can lead to the discrimination of women in myriad ways including fewer

job offers (Sheltzer & Smith, 2014), negative tenure decisions (Carr et al., 2018; Jaschik, 2014), and fewer research citations (Larivière et al., 2013). This, in turn, can lead to a homogenous workforce and the proliferation of underrepresentation in traditionally male-dominated fields (Handley et al., 2015). There are penalties for women who “violate” gender stereotypes in male domains (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), which can result in further negative career consequences (Dresden, Dresden, & Ridge, 2018; Filut et al., 2017). Additionally, women may be subtly socialized away from positions of leadership or held back from promotion (Rogus-Pulia et al., 2018).

Implicit bias can also result in misjudgement, like the negative evaluation of women as less capable when compared to male peers (Dresden, Dresden, & Ridge, 2018; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). McClelland and Holland (2015) found that leaders’ implicit bias was often at play in judgements about women and men’s interests, and can be reflected in the ways work is allocated in institutions. In particular, women may be assigned an overwhelming degree of service (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Wood et al., 2015) and lower-recognition responsibilities than their male counterparts (Misra et al., 2011; Pyke, 2014). Academics who spend more time on service work, teaching, and mentoring have less time for research, which is requisite for promotion (Pyke, 2014). Women also carry a disproportionate service burden as a result of token status (Kanter, 1977; Wood et al., 2015).

### **Gendered and Scholarly Alienation, Isolation, and the Proving Process**

Women are encouraged to report experiences of GBHD; yet researchers have found that women who have reported such discrimination in male-dominated organizations (de Haas & Timmerman, 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2012) have experienced social isolation and low self-confidence as a result (Carr et al., 2018). They were also more likely to experience exclusion and other detrimental effects, including lower work outcomes in areas of productivity and advancement (Ahmed, 2021; Settles et al., 2012) and threats to psychological well-being (Amanatullah, & Morris, 2010; Findler et al., 2007; Williams & Zadro, 2001). Settles et al. (2012) have characterized the above outcomes as “scholarly alienation” (p. 181).

Women continue to disproportionately face challenges during the age-old proving process to their legitimacy, authority, and knowledge by both students and colleagues

(Ahmed, 2021; Arnold & Crawford, 2016; Zambrana et al., 2017). This results in more time, emotion, and effort put toward proving their worth in academia. There is also the unreasonable burden placed on women as the solution-holders to their problems of historic underrepresentation in the workplace and the presence of implicit bias (McClelland & Holland, 2015). McClelland and Holland (2015) and Ahmed (2014) explain that the onus of institutional change becomes the burden of women who are, paradoxically, also tasked with the challenge of “fitting in” and adjusting attitudes, expectations (family and career), and perceptions of others in the academic system.

## Methodology

### Participants

Women academics at Canadian universities were invited to participate in this survey. In total, 244 individuals who identified as women participated. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Just under two-thirds of the sample were over age 45 (63.4%) and predominantly in tenured or tenure-track positions (63.8%). Slightly over one in seven respondents (13.8%) self-identified as racialized and less than one in 25 (3.8%) self-identified as Indigenous. Almost all (96.0%) reported being highly educated with a postgraduate degree, working specifically (99.1%) at a university. Fully 91% of participants ( $n = 222$ ) identified discipline focus as STEM ( $n = 65$ ), non-STEM ( $n = 132$ ), or other ( $n = 25$ ). Most of the respondents ( $n = 158$ ) indicated they work in British Columbia; the remaining respondents indicated as follows: 51 in Ontario, eight in New Brunswick, three in Alberta, one in Saskatchewan, and one in Prince Edward Island. Two participants left the question blank. Thirty-six respondents indicated either that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that their workplace, as a whole, was female-dominated. However, 158 women participants indicated either that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the senior leadership in their workplace was male-dominated.

## Survey Instrument

The survey was conducted from March 12 to May 31, 2020, and accessed through an embedded link. Promotion of the survey was carried out via Twitter and Facebook, and also shared by various Canadian faculty associations. No in-depth, personally identifiable information was collected, including discipline and university affiliation. The survey consisted of seven sections: (a) demographics, (b) perceptions of workplace gender distribution, (c) experiences of gender-based discrimination, (d) career advancement, (e) experiences with gender-based harassment, and (f) GBDH reporting. Respondents were asked in each section to comment and provide context to their answers. Questions were adapted from the National Park Service Work Environment Survey (CFI Group, 2017) and were Likert, multiple-choice, and open response. See sample questions in Appendix A.

## Data Analysis

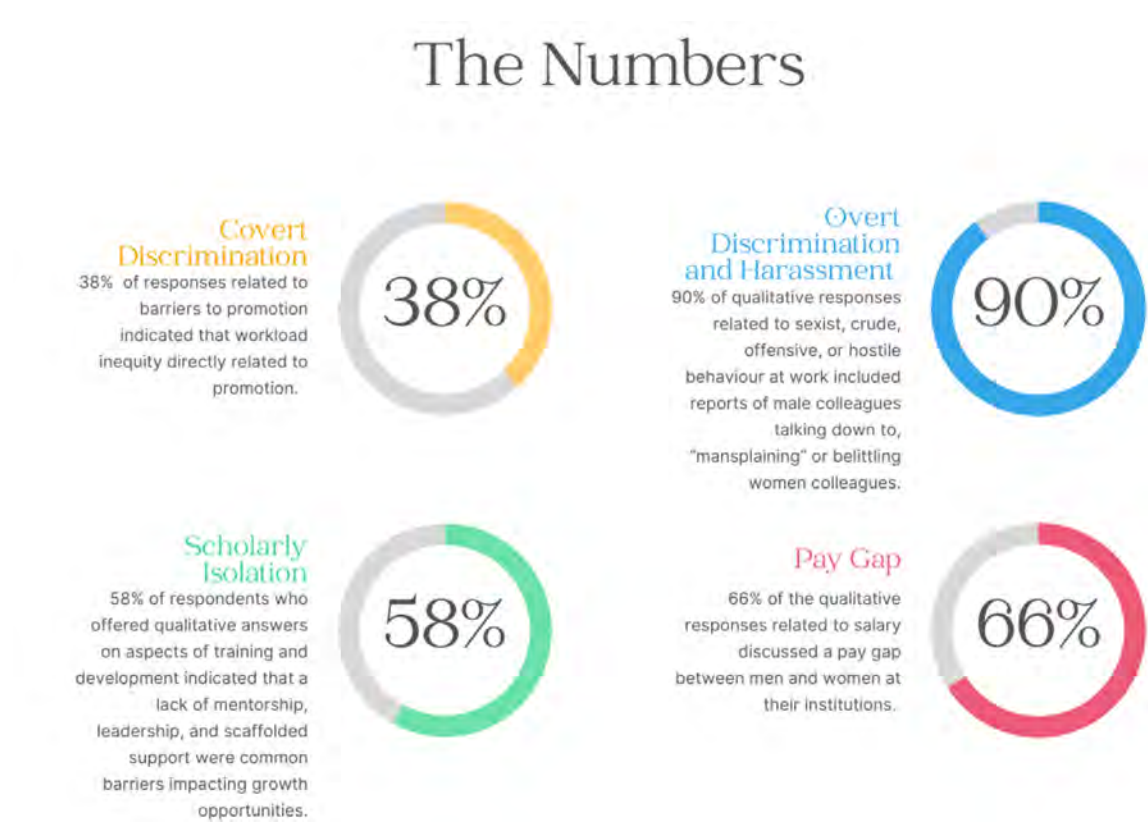
While we do report some frequencies, our main interest was in the open responses of the participants. Consequently, the survey data were examined using qualitative thematic analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Each member of the research team did a preliminary reading of survey responses, then met to discuss emerging trends in the data. After the group discussion, one of the researchers then conducted a second reading of the survey data and coded it using a combination of a priori codes taken from the literature, descriptive codes, and in vivo codes (words taken directly from the participants' comments) (Miles et al., 2020). A priori codes included those such as "exclusionary practices," "workload inequity," and "subtle discrimination." Descriptive codes included short sentences or words describing sections of participants' comments, such as "participants discussed pay gap between men and women," "as respondents have aged, the sexual harassment decreased," and "policy failure." Finally, in vivo codes included words like "mansplaining" and "up-and-down looks." The various codes were then re-read and grouped into overt and covert practices, and a theme that crossed into both: systemic silencing of reporting. An emphasis and a contribution of this research has been afforded to the participants' own voices in the reporting of our results. Findings are further delineated as to whether comments were made by women who self-identified as racialized.

## Findings

Throughout the study respondents identified several experiences that led to structural inequality. First, and easily identified, were the more deliberate, *overt* institutional practices. These include discrimination and harassment, heavier workloads, and inequitable pay practices. Second, respondents relayed experiences which were the result of more covert practices, including scholarly isolation, subtle methods of harassment and discrimination, the compounding effects of intersectionality, and barriers to promotion (Millar & Barker, 2020). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of some of the numbers. Finally, respondents noted that regardless of whether these practices were overt or covert, there were systematic barriers to silence reporting of these experiences to university administration.

Figure 1

*Covert and Overt Discrimination by the Numbers*





## Overt Practices

***Discrimination and harassment.*** Throughout the survey, participants repeatedly described their experiences of being subjected to overt GBDH practices through macro-aggressions enabled by persistent societal assumptions, structures and systems, and policies. This led some to question where the locus of control was in their working environments, despite having women in leadership roles. For example, one participant shared:

At my department/faculty level, I (a woman) am head but I spend 90% of my time dealing with 10% of my faculty who are causing problems. That 10% is made up of senior male colleagues who are being jerks to me and other faculty.

While another described more common experiences of GBHD, such as:

inappropriate jokes about me going into labour at work while pregnant. But some were more awful—like the dean saying that I hadn't been back from maternity leave for long enough to go forward for early promotion/tenure (when that is NOT a real policy)... Dean and senior male colleague saying that the entry-level salary would be plenty for me during my faculty interview (when I was a single, young female).

Similarly, another participant shared:

When I questioned my dean about why I had not received merit pay in my first year as an assistant professor, despite receiving a large SSHRC grant and publishing 6 articles, he implied that I had not put in enough time yet to be considered, and when pressed, he told me that my husband makes a lot of money and the male colleague who did receive merit pay had a family and his wife was not employed outside the home. The assumptions built into those statements are stunning.

These last two examples are clear illustrations of the implicit bias held by men in supervisory roles over women. They also illuminate the burden of the proving process, suggesting that women are held to different standards in terms of their career advancement than men.

Of the 60 qualitative responses related to sexist, crude, offensive, or hostile behaviour at work, 54 respondents reported instances of male colleagues talking down to, “mansplaining,” or belittling women colleagues. For example:

Casual minimizing of women is commonplace. Male colleagues often refer to female colleagues as “ladies” (e.g., “how are you ladies doing today?”), or I have seen male colleagues literally yelling at female colleagues (especially ones who are younger than they are). I personally had an older male colleague come up to me after a meeting. He hadn’t liked what I’d said and he waved his finger in my face and said in a “little girl” tone, “you need to better understand what you are talking about before you say things like that.”... It’s exhausting to be constantly belittled and talked down to.

Based on the responses, inappropriate jokes and comments were common when participants described overt acts of discrimination and harassment of women in this survey. A racialized participant noted how these aspects of work can be amplified:

It is not just gender, it is also the intersection of ethnicity and race. I feel that our department has both covert sexism and racism present.

***Uneven distribution of workload.*** Many respondents discussed how male dominance in the academic workplace has resulted in an uneven distribution of responsibility and workload. As one participant explained:

My supervisors consider gender by sending service requests, student support, and other work demands related to “women’s issues” (i.e., ...the need for someone to serve on a committee about gendered violence, the need for someone to speak at an event on a diversity issue) to me. My male colleagues have been able to publish many books and articles in the same time that myself and other women colleagues have struggled to do so, which I see as related to the overload of other work which is not valued equal to publications.

Another respondent noted that as one of the only women full professors at her institution, she was called on for committee work at the institutional level far more often than her male counterparts when tenured representation of women was required or seen as

desirable. One racialized respondent offered how this uneven distribution of service load changed the way she worked:

Having seen the inequities, I have kind of given up on the idea of being motivated by promotion. In my case, I have come to see that tenure should not be a driving force in my work because if it is, I will end up doing double the work—the work that matters to me and the work that the institution values. I had this realization after serving on a work-intensive university committee for which I received no teaching release, while my male colleague sat on a different university for which he received a teaching release. I was expected to do double the work, which prevented me from completing publications which are required for merit and promotion.

Based on the responses in our survey, it appears that the uneven distribution of responsibilities and workload distracted and disadvantaged women across the span of their careers.

***Inequitable pay.*** Of the 59 qualitative responses related to salary, 39 participants discussed a pay gap. One individual described her experience of being hired at the same or lower rate compared to new male hires with “far less experience and publications.” Twelve respondents explicitly discussed a difference in starting salary between men and women. For example:

All males were given a much higher starting salary than the females in my unit. This has created a gender gap in salary that will last and persist throughout our entire careers.

While another respondent offered:

I know from analyzing data in our university that while recruitment of male and female faculty is reaching parity, women are disproportionately recruited into lower-rank positions, and earn less.

Respondents shared similar stories of being hired at “a very low rate” with one individual explaining she was “low-balled” to the point that she experienced not working her “way up the salary ladder,” but rather having to “dig and climb [her] way out of the trench [the associate dean] dumped [her] in.”

This often could extend into any merit increases:

After maternity leaves and breast cancer treatments I did not receive merit increments. My salary is not on par with peers in my group who do not have children.

Racialized women in this study offered similar overt experiences noting, “I get paid well. I am not dissatisfied with my salary. I am extremely dissatisfied that several male administrators make more than ALL their female counterparts.” Another reported “My male department head told me that I was not eligible for merit-based pay-rises. They were for another group. This was an outright lie.” A third offered that she was actively discouraged from seeking wage increases:

a male doctoral student in my area was recently hired at \$20K more than my starting salary despite my having 15 years more experience.... Also, when I was hired my male head of department discouraged me from asking the dean for a higher salary and I listened to him which I later regretted because I found out that new male hires that same year and the following year who were hired with far less experience and publications were granted the same or higher salary.

As previously noted, the pervasive pay gap was a concern to 66% of the respondents.

## Covert Practices

The kinds of overt forms of gender-based discrimination discussed in the previous section have some avenues of redress. Covert practices, on the other hand, are less visible, more subtle, and sometimes more difficult to prove. Lennartz et al. (2019) argue that the “presence of a successfully implemented policy may in itself *provoke* covert discrimination and thus be responsible for an increase in covert types of discrimination” (p. 129). They suggest that a reduction in overt forms of discrimination can actually lead to more covert forms. Our findings revealed that covert discrimination can take the form of scholarly isolation, barriers to promotion, and microaggressions. Women with intersectional identities are more prone to covert discrimination practices because of “double jeopardy” (Williams, 2014), or the multiple layers of marginalization that covert practices target.

The insidiousness of these practices is that they often leave women questioning their experiences. One racialized respondent noted: “Discrimination in my experience has rarely been overt. It’s therefore sometimes difficult to be sure that that’s what’s going on.”

**Scholarly isolation.** Non-inclusionary practices were referenced throughout the survey as tools for maintaining the male-dominated status quo. While at times they were more obvious, such as not being invited to social events, at other times they were more subtle, such as not being provided with mentorship or having ideas recognized at meetings:

At my institution, women are less likely to be invited to social gatherings (particularly for drinks), which are important to networking, departmental politics, and advancement.

One racialized respondent stated that: “I will just be ‘uninvited,’ ‘omitted,’ ‘discarded.’ With no fight, no insults.” Another participant shared, “I am never invited to take up leadership positions, despite a strong record of leadership elsewhere in the university.”

Over half (28/48) of respondents who offered qualitative answers on aspects of training and development indicated that a lack of mentorship, leadership, and scaffolded support were common barriers impacting growth opportunities. One participant shared:

I have not had any outwardly macro-aggressions happen recently—or perhaps even at all. It’s much more subtle than that, and I think manifests most strongly in the lack of mentorship around my career and unwillingness to help me network and find continuing work.

This was even more apparent for racialized women. A woman who identified as racialized reported that even though she was offered mentorship, it was difficult to find common ground:

I was provided a senior faculty mentor when I started, but he was a White male colleague and the world of opportunities he was living and working in seemed vastly different from mine. We only met once.

Throughout the survey, participants also cited they were isolated in work environments that did not consider women’s needs and/or perspectives. One racialized participant experienced the following:

Dean (male, White, no kids) told me to seek professional help if I can't handle my private life (two kids under four at the time and husband traveling for work 4–6 days every week). Senior colleague (male, White, three teenage kids) told me “he had three kids in three years while he was an assistant professor and it did not affect his career” but neglected to mention that his wife was a stay-at-home mom.

Some participants also explained colleagues ignored their ideas until those same ideas were suggested by a man. A racialized participant described her experiences:

Getting ignored in meetings; having my ideas criticized and then repeated by a male colleague and the idea is praised; not being put in positions of authority even though I would be a good choice, and I'm enthusiastic about doing the job; having to pull rank in instructor meetings because TAs try to explain things to me; etc. I'm only listing things that others observed also.

Based on the participants' responses, scholarly isolation occurred in various forms and was used prolifically as an oppression tactic.

***Discrimination and harassment.*** The respondents discussed GBHD in terms of it being subtle, persistent, and difficult to quantify, but nonetheless constant, exhausting, and detrimental. For example:

I have very rarely experienced overt direct discrimination based on gender. Instead, what I routinely experience is daily, systemic, and ingrained. In meetings, a certain portion of loud older (usually White) men assume positions of authority and speak over others. Male colleagues with similar experience and credentials to me are given airtime when I and other women are not, or are able to confidently negotiate additional benefits for themselves. Certain male colleagues throw their weight around and don't hesitate to engage in aggressive conflict to get what they want. More senior male colleagues react badly to perceived criticism when it is coming from younger women, even when it is clear that the younger women are the experts. More senior women are disproportionately recruited into “helping” senior admin positions and loaded up with that kind of work.

Another shared she experienced negative pushback in her leadership role from male colleagues who feel threatened:

My primary experiences of “belittlement” have been with senior (White) male faculty members who received advice, feedback, or communications from me as per my required role and skills, and to which they reacted very badly. In each case, my strong sense was that they were reacting to being “corrected” by a (a) younger, (b) woman. From experience, I don’t think they would have responded (aggressively) to senior male colleagues in the same way.

One racialized respondent reported feeling more guarded than their male colleagues, noting that she may be perceived as angry, rather than being assertive, having “to always be super positive or I get accused of being mean. I’ve seen my male colleagues be very direct, and never get called out.”

Still others report behavioural signs of sexism, noting:

A female colleague of mine often experiences male colleagues running their eyes up and down her body. Another colleague who does not conform to traditional femininities is often referred to as a bitch or bitchy...so many examples.

Many of these behaviours can be described as microaggressions, or indirect, subtle instances of discrimination that reinforce othering and can cause significant harm.

**Barriers to promotion.** 18 of 73 comments were selected for inclusion in the coding related to barriers to promotion. Seven participants explicitly discussed workload inequity negatively impacting promotion. As mentioned above, this included the unequal allocation of service workload. In addition to this, nine participants discussed structural inequity impacting promotion. One participant observed that P&T (promotion and tenure) at her university “prejudices against single moms and people with disabilities who cannot travel”:

I went up for tenure and promotion at the same time as a male colleague who was hired in the same year as me (indeed, for the same position. The search committee chose me, but the president of the university liked the

male candidate much better and hired him in addition to me.). He and I have similar publication records; I have done more service than him. He was granted promotion and I was not, though I was granted tenure. The letter from the VPA [Vice President – Academic] was glowing, it gave no hint as to why I had been denied promotion. When I spoke with my chair about it, he indicated my male colleague had submitted a more “robust” tenure and promotion portfolio. He also disclosed that both he and another member of the promotion and tenure committee had worked with my male colleague on preparing his portfolio.

Another respondent who identified as racialized was told by a “senior colleague (female, White, no kids)... ‘you decided to have kids, no[w] deal with it,’” offering there was little support for women who had childcare responsibilities in her department. These comments suggest that there are still significant barriers to promotion that are linked to systemic issues (i.e., taking on higher service loads and primary responsibility for family care) as well as more covert practices of men supervisors supporting their male colleagues through the tenure and promotion process.

## **Systemic Silencing of Reporting**

There was a consensus amongst the respondents that policy and “process” were simply there to uphold the appearance of equality but in actuality did little; hence, there was systemic silencing that predominantly induced fear. Throughout the survey, respondents shared stories of first having officially reported GBHD and the subsequent negative outcomes of their reports. For example, one participant explained, “I tried to speak to my Department Head, but he is one of the worst perpetrators, who engages in ‘gaslighting’ and ‘blaming the victim’ while claiming not to take sides, then praises the perpetrator.” Another shared, “The situation was taken out of my hands in a way that made me extremely uncomfortable. I was denied of power yet again, was how it felt at the time.”

Participants also talked about worrying their GBHD reports would not be taken seriously. For example, one participant shared, “[I] did not consider it serious enough to report.” Another noted, “These things are not taken seriously.” Racialized respondents reported more deliberate efforts to silence, noting the inherent conflict of interest in the reporting and resolution processes. For example, one participant shared,



I am afraid of reporting my experiences to my supervisor or dean because of retaliation and blaming of the victim (and inaction). The current head of my department explicitly told me it looked bad on me that I requested for my perpetrator not to participate in my tenure review.

While another relayed

My report was “lost” and never appropriately filed. I kept asking about it and was told by my department head that it was “in process” or “under investigation” until that individual left. After two years, that person left and there was no record of the incident according to my new department head.

Related to this, eight qualitative responses explicitly revealed that participants felt as though they could not report anything without repercussions. For example, one participant commented, “there is no point in reporting at our university; one is marked for retaliation for anything other than pretending ‘everything we do as an institution is perfect’ and ‘everyone is perfectly fine.’” Another participant shared, “I ultimately chose not to escalate the reporting because I feared the negative consequences that it would have for me.”

Participants also shared stories related to a lack of clarity in the complaints process:

I would have liked to escalate my complaint, which I lodged when my chair yelled at me in public, but I was told by the union this would be difficult because I and the chair were both union members.

Both policies and processes at many of the participants’ institutions have done little in the way of supporting individuals. Of the reporting process, one participant reported that she “was not supported, encouraged not to say anything.” Furthermore, the outcomes have been unsatisfactory and, at times, actively damaging. For those who chose to report, they described the experience and the outcome as draining and fear-inducing. One respondent explained:

Reporting the workplace harassment was as emotionally draining as the harassment itself. Writing out the complaint, which was 75 pages, took months of work, and required me to review all of the terrible comments and

experiences as I combed over email. The dean's office didn't know how to handle a harassment complaint and wrote me back a letter explaining that the male colleague was frustrated with me. I responded with another complaint, this time including concerns about the dean's office failure to understand and apply the workplace harassment frameworks.

Connected to this, participants discussed feeling vulnerable or unsafe. One relayed that she "felt career unsafe; felt bullied" and another shared, "I did not feel physically unsafe, but I did feel professionally vulnerable." Respondents who did report GBHD described emotionally and psychologically distressing reporting experiences, which acted as a deterrent. One racialized respondent reported further silencing and distrust with EDI efforts:

Is not simply gender. Is the intersection with ethnicity too. I have seen how "gender" has been used to shut down our voices. They just put a "woman" in a position of leadership, a woman "they" control, and no one can say anything! Hey! They are gender equality people!

## Discussion

Our findings related to systemic issues around reporting complaints aligns with Ahmed's (2021) observations that a gap between what is supposed to happen when someone makes a complaint based on policies and procedures and what actually happens to those who make complaints is highly problematic. As one respondent who was seeking equity in the workplace reported:

There is a huge gap between the policies and discourse of equity that the institution and my department projects out into the world, and the experience of actually being there as someone situated within numerous "equity" groups. Because of my sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnic/cultural background, I often experience what I would describe as ambient or environmental harm. I am portrayed as less capable and less valuable than my male colleagues. I am simultaneously portrayed solely through the lens of risk and marginalization within equity literature and policies. My work is devalued in ways that count toward career development, but then valued

when the institution needs a visible face for “equity” in research and teaching. I have seriously considered getting out of this field entirely because of the double-speak around issues of equity and gender discrimination.

The system of academia has been constructed around and continues to uphold the advancement of male academics, and this is evident in our participants’ responses. Mason et al. (2013) explain,

It is difficult to change a culture that has for centuries sustained a lockstep career model, a model that stipulates uninterrupted progress from graduate school to postdoc to Assistant Professor in a prescribed number of years, usually culminating in tenure around age 40. (pp. 111–112)

While women may be increasingly represented in universities as colleagues and students, they continue to be “chilled” in ways shared by our participants and supported in the literature—despite ardent proclamations of a commitment to EDI by institutions.

Different than other studies (cf. Hango, 2021), our research makes the important distinction between covert and overt practices. Current policies based specifically around the legalistic concepts of overt harassment will probably fail to address the lived, more covert discrimination women face. This is evidenced by the fact that, despite increased initiatives to support women, there are still gender wage gaps (Millar & Barker, 2020), low numbers of women in full professor and senior leadership positions, high service workloads for women (Guarino & Borden, 2017), and especially women of colour (Domingo et al., 2020), and far too many cases of GBHD (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). Our research contextualizes previous work, sharing the stories of women as they move through these environments.

Participants shared discrimination and harassment based on gender, race, socio-economic status, disability, and age, which compounded feelings of “otherness” at work. Participants both reported on general and specific incidents of intersectional discrimination and harassment, leading to feelings of isolation. Some of their experiences are overt, direct examples of discrimination and harassment, while for other respondents, the subtlety of the intersectional harassment and/or discrimination has left them questioning their interpretations of their experiences. Responses on the intersection of age and gender were prolific throughout the survey—even in qualitative responses. This suggests a strong connec-

tion between GBHD and young or early-career women, and more research is needed to understand the nuances of GBHD for early-stage researchers and more senior researchers.

While Canadian universities are becoming acutely aware of, and attentive to, racial and social justice issues and are working to dismantle historic premises/scaffolding that continue to suppress the voices of women, the climate remains chilly. This is evidenced in the many structural/institutional factors that compound to make the academic work environment a chilly, and sometimes frigid, climate for women. The literature in the past 20 years suggests that GBHD is consistent with a desire for control (Scott, 2018) and dominance (Berdahl, 2007). Our results provide further support that in academia, the “proving process” can play out in many ways, including issues with career advancement and recognition for women due to implicit and explicit bias, male aggression and hostility, and social and academic isolation. This has led to negative psychological impacts, the disproportionate burden to prove competence, increased token and other service work, and ultimately higher workloads. “Institutional housekeeping” (Misra et al., 2011) in the form of service to the university has fallen onto the workloads of academic women.

Misra et al. (2011) explained “that cultural changes are needed to stress the value of the work of the professoriate more broadly. Too many faculty members and administrators devalue the importance of institutional housekeeping, even though it is crucial for the institution’s ongoing health” (para. 22). Institutions need to reimagine what tenure and promotion looks like. The authors suggest that “universities need to recognize, reward, and publicize their faculty’s service, mentoring, and teaching accomplishments, in addition to their research accomplishments, and ensure that promotions recognize the wide range of contributions faculty make” (Misra et al., 2011, para. 22). Based on the responses from our survey, the subtle discrimination and harassment of academic women is far-reaching and particularly damaging because it has been so ubiquitous, difficult to call out, and, as one participant in our study described, has amounted to “death by 1000 cuts.” We argue that universities must take up the challenge to question the very framework upon which women and minoritized academics are judged.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The climate for women continues to be chilly and persists almost 30 years after *Breaking Anonymity* (The Chilly Collective, 1995) was published and almost 40 years since Bernice Sandler coined the term “chilly climate.” The voices of our participants provide further evidence that it is not a dead issue. The importance of continuing to highlight this reality cannot be underemphasized.

In this article we have presented the voices of people who identify as women and their experiences with gender-based harassment. In our survey construction we included questions about intersectional identities (which may include any combination of race, religion, disability, and class, among others), and in our analysis we found that many women discussed how their intersectional identities impacted their experiences of gender-based harassment in Canadian academe. Indeed, there have been multiple calls for analyses of intersectionalities and experiences of women in academia (e.g., Acker & Muzzin, 2019; Armstrong & Jovanovic, 2015). Our findings acknowledge that Indigenous women, racialized women, lesbian/trans women, and women with disabilities may face additional challenges in the Canadian academy that their cisgender, straight, able-bodied, White colleagues will never have to confront as a result of their privilege. Our intention with this article is to re-open the conversation of the Chilly Collective (1995). We want Canadian academe to acknowledge the perseverating insidiousness of gender-based harassment. This article serves to continue a much-needed conversation in the experience of women academics and encourages a more rigorous investigation of intersectional experience.

At the heart of women’s experiences are issues of equality and striving for equality, inside a system that was built by and for male academics. Notions of equality within academic institutions are predicated on being equal within systemic structures that were built by and for men. Under this system, equality must be performed to meet age-old patriarchal standards for research, teaching, and service that were set decades ago without the consultation or participation of women.

Results of these experiences of equality defined within systems created by the patriarchy can be clearly seen in recent research. In 2021, only 30% of full professors in Canada were women, and maximum salaries across the professoriate continue to be higher for men (Uppal & Hango, 2022). There is a glimmer of hope, however, as 44% of associate and 50% of assistant professors are women, who will eventually climb up

the ranks. There is a persistent gender pay gap despite some universities giving women professors raises or lump-sum payments to address historical inequities (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2018; Momani et al., 2019). While women have almost reached parity in terms of assuming senior leadership roles, there continue to be fewer women than men in the executive head and vice-president positions (Universities Canada, 2019). This same report notes that in 2019 women represented 26% of presidencies in Canada, up from 20% in 2015. The number of women at this rank has remained static for close to 30 years (Turpin et al., 2014).

Chilly climates for women could thaw if institutions moved beyond performative actions. Policies alone are not enough. The experiences shared by respondents in this research highlight the differences between policy-in-intent and policy-in-experience. Developing institutional intervention is necessary to counter the likelihood and effects of implicit bias (O'Meara & Stromquist, 2015). Existing research on how to "warm" the climate for women abounds. This research emphasizes the critical need for organizations and leaders to change (McClelland & Holland, 2015). Leadership is a major factor involved in hospitable work environment development for women and may encourage the retention of women academics (Salomon & Cairns, 2010). Choosing change requires that we reconsider what we mean by true leadership and academic success, given that those who succeed in a biased system based on high research productivity may be at risk of reinforcing the very institutional structures which fail to support them effectively.

There has been a collective endorsement of including EDI as a priority in university strategic plans across Canada and this is a good first step; however, "championing EDI principles and values" is only a commitment to a lofty goal without concrete plans (Universities Canada, 2019). As the Universities Canada report concludes, university presidents are beginning to evaluate the performance of their senior administrative teams on "how well they implement EDI principles and best practices in their work" (p. 9); however, the report also notes "while some institutions have instituted formal EDI performance metrics, others have not" (p. 9). An important first step in changing undesirable behaviour and inspiring institutional change for faculty, staff, and students is building an awareness of the issue/bias through training and action, like building empathy, and understanding the lived experiences of others (Chapman et al., 2013; Filut et al., 2017; Rogus-Pulia et al., 2018). Awareness in this respect could alter the behaviour of leaders when allocating or evaluating work deemed as "housecleaning" and could help prevent women from dis-

proportionately carrying the service burdens of their faculties/departments (Misra et al., 2011). Finally, programs to support women in academia can also be effective, such as a course to promote women's leadership self-efficacy (Isaac et al., 2012). Hiring processes need to be revised to reduce the risk of isolating women applicants or inducing implicit bias practices (Filut et al., 2017; Rogus-Pulia et al., 2018). Women's persistent lower annual performance rewards can be eliminated when measures of transparency and clear accountability are introduced (Castilla, 2015; Rogus-Pulia et al., 2018).

This study is not without its limitations. First, this study was based on an availability sample of participants in the Canadian context. As such, results from this study are not generalizable to the experiences of all academics who identify as women, although our results mirror and extend recent studies (Hango, 2021). Our results also highlight the need to consider racialization and intersectionality more fully. While this did emerge in the context of our results, a more nuanced analysis would be required to examine the themes identified from this crucial lens. Despite these limitations, we contend that the findings and issues raised continue to be of critical importance to advancing academia and society more broadly. It is hoped that this article will spark further discussion on the lived experiences women academics continue to face, in a system that continues to ignore the inherent biases of the very institutional structures on which recent EDI measures have been placed.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample Survey Questions**

- a) Participant demographics: “With which gender do you identify?” and “In what type of educational institution do you primarily work?”
- b) Perceptions of workplace gender distribution: “Please state how much you would agree with the following statement: ‘Thinking about my workplace as a whole, I would say it is female dominated.’”
- c) Experiences of gender-based discrimination: “Gender discrimination in the workplace: ‘I have personally experienced gender discrimination in the workplace.’”
- d) Career advancement: “Promotion discrimination: ‘My manager/supervisor encourages me to see my potential.’”
- e) Experiences with gender-based harassment: “Have you ever experienced unwanted sexual attention at work?”
- f) Gender-based discrimination and harassment reporting: “We understand that people may have had more than one experience of gender-based harassment or discrimination. Thinking about your most serious incident, did you talk to anyone about it to share your experience (unofficially)? (Click all that apply)”