

Paving the Way for Gender Equity in Higher Education

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The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg famously recalled being turned away from a library at Harvard because it didn't allow women inside. In 2022 such stories reflect lack of gender equality in the past, but the origins and the attitudes behind them still linger in higher education today.

As the international community marks Women's Equality Day (Aug. 26), it is important to note that society has made significant strides. In Israel alone, according to the Council for Higher Education, women comprise the majority of enrolled students in every degree from bachelor's (58%) to PhD (53%). But for women who choose to remain in academia, their opportunities for advancement and promotions are still not on par with men, and gender equity among higher education faculty is still elusive.

Since representation matters, certainly when it comes to who is educating the next generation of students, University of Haifa is proud to be a leader among Israeli higher education institutions in paving a path forward to achieving gender equity for its women faculty. Currently, 45% of the University's faculty members are women — exceeding most other major higher education institutions in Israel.

Not to be confused with gender equality, gender equity is an ongoing process that is designed to promote gender parity between men and women in an organization. Gender equity, then, is the method by which we finally achieve gender equality — the final result. In academia, achieving gender equity has the potential to affect society as a whole, from the classroom to the boardroom.



There are myriad reasons why this issue persists today, some of which are hardly intentional. The academic ethos could be blind to its own gender bias when it comes to recruitment and promotions, or to the prevalence of blatant exclusionary practices like sexual harassment or work hours that are incompatible with achieving a work-family balance. Often, any kind of gender discrimination occurs in the shadows, where institutional leaders are unaware of

an issue since nothing has been reported — or they are in willful denial of its existence.

Moreover, sometimes even well-meaning initiatives can backfire. Take, for example, the various government and non-governmental incentives that aim to get women involved in the STEM fields. While those initiatives are commendable, they leave women who choose to go into non-STEM related disciplines undersupported.

Currently, there are two competing theories as to why the genders are still unequal in the workplace. The first is the glass ceiling theory, which states that there are certain invisible barriers in place that prevent true equity from taking place. The second is the pipeline theory, which stipulates that gender equity will be achieved, but only over time and without outside intervention.

In the European Union, where gender equity programs have been in place for several decades, the pipeline approach has not achieved the hoped-for goals. In a document distributed a few years ago by the EU to member countries and partners, including Israel, the EU clarified that academia remains characterized by fundamental inequality despite efforts by the EU and by its states to achieve gender equality. Every year, the

number of new female faculty is less than onehalf the number of female doctoral graduates, with few women hired into positions entailing leadership and decision-making. Accordingly, the EU intensifies its efforts and enriches the tools for achieving equality.

At University of Haifa, we tackled this issue head-on by establishing a Gender Equity Unit and drafting a strategic plan that we submitted to the Council for Higher Education. The plan expands upon the Equator Index program, which measures qualitative and quantitative ways in which higher education institutions are addressing gender inequity among their ranks for the 2021-25 academic years.

The University remains very close to meeting the requirements presented by the Council's Planning and Budgeting Committee, both in terms of gender parity at large and in the percentage of women in senior academic ranks. In two faculties — Education and Health and Welfare — women constitute 70% of the faculty.

But we cannot afford to rest on our laurels since in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Natural Sciences, and Faculty of Law we have not achieved gender parity yet, an issue we are working hard to rectify. Moreover, we are seeing a dismaying trend that the higher the rank of a faculty member, the more likely that person will be a man.

As such, we have launched the METIS project, which is aimed toward mentoring women researchers at the University. The program provides much-needed leadership workshops, scholarships and research grants, cognitive training, and advocates for gender-neutral language on campus in order to help level the playing field.

With 2025 approaching, we hope to achieve gender parity in senior management positions across the board and make our university culture even more inclusive.

The data speaks clearly. University of Haifa has the building blocks to establish a paradigm for how other universities in Israel and beyond can achieve gender equality. We are proud of our achievements, yet at the same time look toward the future and work to create a world that the intrepid women who came before us would want our daughters and granddaughters to live in

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