

Analysis reveals that harsh workplace climate is pushing women out of academia

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Women faculty are more likely to leave academia than men faculty throughout all career stages in U.S. universities, University of Colorado Boulder researchers revealed in the most comprehensive analysis of retention in academia to date.

The team [published](#) the findings Oct. 20 in the journal *Science Advances*. The researchers found that a harsh workplace climate, which can include harassment and feelings of not belonging, was the most common reason women left [academia](#). This attrition affects not only early-career professionals, but also those who have achieved the highest ranks in universities, the study found.

This finding helps to explain, in part, why women remain underrepresented among faculty in nearly all academic fields in the U.S., said Katie Spoon, the paper's first author and a Ph.D. student in the Department of Computer Science. For example, only 28% of professors in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields are women in the U.S., despite women receiving 40% of STEM Ph.D.s for the past 10 to 15 years.

"If you look back at the literature from 20 or 30 years ago, it painted a much bleaker picture than many of the newer studies today," said Aaron Clauset, the paper's corresponding author and a professor of computer science. "Things are changing, but there is still a lot of work left to do."

Previous research on gendered attrition in academia tended to have a limited scope.

Many studies investigated faculty retention only among assistant professors, in STEM fields, or at high-prestige institutions, due to the difficulties in finding and reaching faculty who left academia.

Spoon and her team analyzed a census of employment records of all

245,270 tenure-track and tenured professors from 391 Ph.D.-granting universities and institutions in the U.S. They came from STEM fields, but also disciplines like social sciences and business. The tenure track is a professor's pathway to promotion.

Faculty members usually start as assistant professors without tenure. If they get promoted, they become tenured associate professors, and eventually they can be promoted to full professors, an indefinite appointment that tends to come with more academic freedom and job security.

The researchers found women are leaving academia at a higher rate than men at every career stage, especially after they receive full professorship. During their appointment as assistant professors, women are 6% more likely to leave their jobs than men each year. The attrition rate is higher among full professors, where women professors are 19% more likely to leave academia than men each year.

"We were surprised to see the [gender gap](#) actually grow after faculty received tenure, given how important the title is," Spoon said. "This result suggests that perhaps the field has neglected thinking about tenured women and their experiences."

The team also surveyed more than 10,000 current and former [faculty members](#) for factors that led or could lead to their decision to leave a faculty job. The result showed women are more likely to feel pushed by a variety of factors out of their faculty positions, while men are more likely to be pulled toward more attractive jobs elsewhere. The most common reasons women, especially tenured women, reported for leaving academia were harsh workplace climates, which can include dysfunctional leadership, harassment, discrimination and feelings of not belonging.

While previous research has suggested that women are more likely to leave academia in pursuit of better work-life balance, the new paper found that male faculty were about as likely to leave for this reason.

"We see an emphasis on [work-life balance](#) among early career faculty members," said Clauset. "But the issue with workplace climate is the dominating factor among the women tenured [professors](#), a position that lasts the majority of one's academic career."

The researchers hope their paper will inspire administrators nationwide to take action.

"It can start with asking [faculty](#), particularly women, what needs to be done, listening, and taking specific, concrete steps to address their concerns," Spoon said.

More information: Katie Spoon et al, Gender and retention patterns among U.S. faculty, *Science Advances* (2023). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.adi2205](#). www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adi2205

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