

“Not all care is love”: The impact of love labour and care on the career trajectories of doctorate holders

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Abstract

Feminist scholars have argued that care and, by extension, care work, is the foundation of every society, as most social practices and economies rely on it. However, despite the importance of loving and caring, these activities often go unnoticed. This article studies the impact of having to provide care and love on the career trajectories of men and women doctorate holders working within and outside academia in Iceland, a country that has consistently topped the Gender Gap Index since 2009. The findings are based on interviews with 32 doctorate holders. By treating love labour and care as theoretical tools, the analysis revealed that the women interviewees perceived themselves to be responsible for most of their intimate love relationships and nurturing in their families. This is problematic, as love labour is not as easily outsourced as care work. Furthermore, the results showed that men were more likely to occupy certain care roles than to provide love labour. This affords them more time and mental space than is the case for women to establish their careers. While the men viewed this gendered division of labour as a matter of personal choice, the women felt that their options were limited, and experienced feelings of guilt.

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Feminist scholars have argued that care, and care work, is the foundation of every society, since most social practices and economies rely on it. This argument rose to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bjørnholt, 2020; da Silva, 2019; Power, 2020), when schools closed and the dynamic infrastructure enabling care work became more visible (Lynch, 2021). However, despite the importance of caring, it often goes unnoticed, as does its gendered nature. Within the context of the gendered division of labour, women have historically been expected to do care work, especially childcare, creating tension as more women participate in paid labour outside the household. Along with women's greater labour force participation, women's education has also increased. The number of doctorate holders, especially among women, has risen throughout the last few decades (Auriol, 2016). Increasing women's educational attainment is crucial to achieving gender parity in employment (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Casey, 2009), but care work often stands in the way of this, even after obtaining an advanced degree. Thus, we argue that studying PhD holders in the context of care is essential.

Hjálmsdóttir and Rafnsdóttir (2024) and Staub and Rafnsdóttir (2020) showed that having a doctorate does not make it easier to balance one's personal and professional lives, especially for women. Although PhD holders working in academia typically enjoy high levels of flexibility and autonomy, Hjálmsdóttir and Rafnsdóttir (2024) revealed that academics, particularly women, experience more complex emotions about their work–life balance than PhD holders working outside academia. Their flexible work arrangements often leave them feeling as though they are perpetually working, unable to switch their brains off and relax. Academia has been argued to be an example of a “care-free” field in which a diverse range of care work has been rendered almost completely invisible (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023).

Building on these findings, recent studies highlighted the importance of not only considering care when dealing with work–life balance, but also adding love as part of the analysis (Bryson, 2014; Jónasdóttir, 2011, 2014, 2018; Lynch, 2021). In differentiating between the concepts of love and care in the context of work–family balance, Lynch (2021) argued that *love* is a personal feeling that cannot be delegated or professionalised, differing from the more practical and sometimes professional nature of *care*. To better understand the recurring gender patterns of care work in families, it is important to leverage love, and not only care, as an analytical tool (Lynch, 2021). Therefore, we synthesise research on care and love labour by examining the roles of these concepts in the family and working lives of PhD holders. We aim to determine how having to provide care and love impacts the career trajectories of women and men doctorate holders working in and outside academia in Iceland, a country that has consistently topped the Gender Gap Index since 2009, making it the global leader in gender equality (The World Economic Forum, 2023).

Iceland has a history of vibrant feminist movements (Jóhannsdóttir, 2019; Rúdólfssdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). The Icelandic government has remained committed to promoting gender equality via a good legal framework, relatively strong family policies, and a large public service sector. The outcome has been increased women's workforce participation, which is among the highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2022). In Iceland, dual-earner households are the norm, and the country has a relatively long history of generous parental leave, with a nontransferable father's quota encouraging paternal leave (Arnalds et al., 2022; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2023). Accessible, high-quality, public daycare facilities are also available. Laws governing gender quotas pertaining to company boards (Axelsdóttir & Halrynjo, 2018) and gender-equal pay standards (The Government of Iceland, n.d.) have been implemented. Nevertheless, the gender pay gap remains unbridged (Ólafsdóttir, 2020), also affecting women doctorate holders (Staub & Heijstra, 2021).

In our research, we distinguish PhD holders into those working within and outside academia, on the assumption that academics often have more flexible work schedules and autonomy than those in other occupations. Furthermore, while some research has assessed gender-based differences among academics (i.e., women and men), only a few studies have focused on doctorate holders outside academia (see e.g., Hjálmsdóttir & Rafnsdóttir, 2024; Staub & Heijstra, 2021; Staub & Rafnsdóttir, 2020).

Therefore, with a focus on PhD holders working inside and outside academia, this study aims to determine the different ways in which men and women perform care and love, and how this connects with gendered experiences and responsibilities within the family. Further, we focus on how performance of love and care influences gendered experiences in relation to working life and career paths.

Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by women with doctoral degrees can help identify ways to better support and empower them. Doing so not only benefits individual women but can also contribute to the creation of a more equitable and prosperous society for all. We draw from 32 interviews with women and men Icelandic doctorate holders working in academia and other nonacademic fields. Our analysis was inspired by the sociological context of love relations and how love labour and care, which can hardly be outsourced, occur in our participants' lives, affecting their career trajectories and work–life balance. Below, we outline the concepts and theories that informed our analysis.

Conceptual framework

The link between the domestic and public spheres is important with respect to gender equality, since these overlapping spheres affect parents' lives in diverse ways (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). The conceptual framework of this study is underpinned by the idea that care and love labour are integral parts of everyday life, and are emotionally taxing and time-consuming activities embedded in relations of power (Bryson, 2014; Lynch, 2021).

Lynch (2021) has outlined three distinguishable sociological contexts in which different affective relations operate: “the primary sphere of intimate love relations; the secondary sphere of professional, neighbourly and community care relations; and the tertiary sphere of solidarity-led political relations with largely unknown others” (p. 16). Our focus when analysing the interview data was the primary sphere of care and love relations. Primary care refers to the nurturing and cocreating work that takes place in families or households. Lynch (2021) refers to this work as “love labour,” explaining how love labour in primary intimate relations is “characterized by strong attachment, intimacy and responsibility over time” (p. 23). These relationships are associated with a high level of personal and social significance, and are therefore difficult to outsource to paid workers because “while love is a part of care, not all care is loving” (Lynch, 2021, p. 73). Despite their differences, care and love are not oppositional concepts but are entangled in nuanced and complex ways. As Baker and Burke (2023) noted, defining care is very difficult because it is heavily influenced by cultural context, as “it is deeply situated, nuanced, culturally informed, and layered” (p. 2).

Love, care, and parenting

As care and love are at the core of human relationships, and love labour reflects widespread gender inequality (Bryson, 2014), love-based relationships should be as central to social science investigations as political, cultural, and economic relations (Lynch et al., 2021). Love labour is especially demanding, as it requires the “investment of attentiveness, commitment, affection, time, energy, physical work and resources that is more intense and demanding than other forms of care labour” (Lynch, 2021, p. 66).

A pioneer of love research, Jónasdóttir (2011, 2014, 2018) applied the concept of “love power” to explain the persistence of gender roles in love relationships. Love, as defined by Jónasdóttir (2011, 2014), is a productive and creative human activity that can be simultaneously empowering and exploitative. “Love power,” she argues, is a core reason men continue to dominate society, despite legal and formal equality (Jónasdóttir, 2011, 2018).

In this vein, Fraser (2016) noted that affective relations are rooted in power relations, and performing love and care requires time, effort, and energy. In capitalist societies, caring roles that involve social reproduction have been separated from economic production, leading to new forms of women’s subordination. Hochschild (2001) pointed out that this separation has created a cultural system that associates social reproduction with women, and the economy with men, highlighting the fact that capitalism is not just an *economic* system but also a highly inventive *cultural* one.

As part of this, normative ideas of hegemonic masculinity influence gender relations and how gendered social practices are ordered (Connell, 2005). As a result, men have generally reaped the benefits of patriarchy, as patterns of practices have allowed them to continue to dominate over women via the status achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In Iceland, young men have generally welcomed changes in gender relations, distancing themselves from traditional ideas of hegemonic masculinity (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018). Nevertheless, the traditional

gendered division of care labour persists as women are still more heavily burdened by a greater share of domestic duties and care work, and thus remain more likely to reduce their working hours when establishing families to make the work–life balance more manageable (Gísladóttir et al., 2023; Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018). Similarly, in Finland, which has comparable gender norms to Iceland, Sevón (2012) showed that when couples become parents, they redefine their roles and begin occupying traditional gendered positions in relationships.

These gendered structures related to care and love labour impact women, who continue to be socially positioned as primary carers, (re)producing the gendered division of labour and perpetuating the lack of recognition of the emotionally demanding and time-consuming nature of care work. This lack of recognition applies especially to the demands of love labour (Lynch, 2021).

According to Bryson (2014), the time when love and care are expected to be performed is based on needs rather than a strict schedule or the capitalist clock. As Lynch (2021) highlighted, people cannot simply turn off the needs of their loved ones. As a result, parents, particularly mothers, often experience constant guilt, which has become synonymous with the idea of good mothering (Collins, 2021). Furthermore, research has indicated that mothers take on the role of “facilitating wives” to support their male partners’ careers (Ehrstein, 2022).

Additionally, love labour requires mental and emotional effort, which is often invisible (Daming, 2019; Lynch, 2021; Robertson et al., 2019), and mainly performed by women. Love labour can increase stress and conflict in relationships (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Daming, 2019), and consequently affect women’s health and well-being (Dean et al., 2022; Ehrstein, 2022).

Love, care, and working life

The social dynamics of politics and public life, shaped by capitalism, are often characterised by indifference and coldness toward others (Lynch, 2021). Patriarchal power relations embedded in organisations are gendered, and reproduce beliefs and identities based on socially constructed gender differences (Acker, 2006). These beliefs are exemplified by Acker’s (1990) conceptualisation of the “ideal worker” as someone fully committed to their job, devoid of personal obligations and responsibilities, and, typically, male (Sang et al., 2015). Thus, women often face difficulties navigating the patriarchal norms that structure workplaces (Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019). Additionally, the unequal gendered division of care and love labour disproportionately benefits men. Women’s provision of unpaid domestic labour and care frees up men’s time, enabling them to take up positions of power in public institutions, designed and organised by men, shoring up male control over women (Bryson, 2007, 2014; Lynch, 2021).

Lynch (2021) pointed out that although patriarchy’s roots predate capitalism, capitalism has reinforced the legitimised gendered value order. Hence, married women perform more care work and housework than their male partners, as “undertaking hands-on primary caring is not central to men’s identity as men” (Lynch, 2021, p. 45). Additionally, care and the emotional needs of dependent others are less likely to inform men’s everyday

experiences. As Lynch (2021, p. 48) pointed out, “their underlying paradigmatic assumptions are framed by their own relatively, and sometimes entirely, care-free experiences.” However, this pattern is often perceived as gender-neutral among couples. The resulting unequal outcomes, which are highly gendered, are often explained by couples as a matter of choice, personal strengths, or efficiency (Damingier, 2020). This individualises gender structures, masking how couples support the social structures informing gender roles.

Method

The data for this study were gathered as part of the larger research project NORDICORE, which studies the career and family paths of doctorate holders. The research data are based on 32 semistructured interviews conducted during the spring and summer of 2018 with doctorate holders residing in the Icelandic capital area. Inspired by feminist knowledge production, we engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004).

Recruitment and participants

The participants were purposefully recruited (Creswell & Poth, 2018) from a list open to the public and hosted by the National and University Library of Iceland, which has, for decades, catalogued information about all Icelandic PhD holders from Icelandic and international universities. We included those who had completed their PhDs 5 to 20 years prior in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, as well as the social sciences and humanities.

We interviewed equal numbers of women and men: eight women and eight men in academic positions, and eight women and eight men in other professions. The participants ranged from 38 to 61 years old at the time of interviewing. All had full-time jobs. Those working outside academia all held managerial positions, with women more commonly working for public institutions. Half of the men worked for public institutions, and the other half worked for private companies. All participants either were in or had been in heterosexual relationships, with 27 currently partnered and five single or divorced. None of the participants were or had been coupled with each other. The women had an average of 1.7 children, and the men had an average of 2.3 children. Women academics had the fewest children on average. Four interviewees had no children. In this article, we elect not to disclose the participants’ sexual orientation to protect their anonymity, considering Iceland’s small population.

Data collection

A semistructured discussion guide, developed collaboratively by the project members, was used in all interviews to keep the conversation on track, and all general standards of ethics were followed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions focused on the decision-making processes associated with participants’ PhDs, career choices, working environments,

and working hours. We also asked about family situations, the division of childcare and domestic labour, as well as the interplay between their personal and professional lives.

All the interviews were held individually, lasted about an hour, and were recorded with the participants' permission.¹ Despite our intention for the interviews to mimic "normal" conversations between people, we agree with feminist scholars DeVault and Gross (2006) that framing research in such a simple way disregards the complexity of human conversations, the researcher's position of power, and the complexity of language.

Analysis

The interviews, conducted in Icelandic, were transcribed word for word and analysed in the original language. We have translated the illustrative quotes from the participants included in this article. We analysed the transcripts using Braun and Clarke's (2013, 2022) six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis, guided by an experiential approach to thematic analysis focused on our participants' lived experiences and the meaning and sense they attribute to their conditions. The analysing process was led by the first author followed upon with discussion with the coauthor where the authors reflected on the analysis together. During the first phase of data analysis, we carefully read through the interview transcripts several times. During the second phase, we systematically worked through the dataset, tagging relevant codes with code labels. We explored the meanings of care and love shared by the participants and assessed their family lives, guided by an understanding of language as a social practice rather than simply a tool of communication (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In Phase 3, we clustered the codes, developing them into potential themes during Phase 4. In Phase 5, we focused on refining, defining, and naming the themes before the final stage of writing the article (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Our analysis was guided by the theoretical concepts of love labour and care and their impact on the management of daily work and family tasks, as well as our critical feminist perspective. By identifying patterns of shared meaning, we moved from codes to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which were based on the experiences and realities shared by our participants.

Findings

Three major themes were generated from the data, which are discussed in the following sections. The first theme centres around gendered experiences of love labour and care in the families, and the second theme draws on how feelings of guilt are gendered, although the women drew on ideas of "being lucky" to have their husbands' support with household chores. The third theme focuses on gendered experiences in relation to working life and career paths. Our research sheds light on how the demands of providing care and love labour shape the career trajectories of men and women PhD holders working in and outside academia in Iceland. The findings indicate that women and men perceived their roles in providing care and love labour in their daily lives and in relation to their

career trajectories quite differently. All participants felt they lived fast-paced lives and struggled to balance family and work, although the specific challenges were gendered. Thus, the women—especially the mothers—discussed in greater detail the emotional toll of caring and how responsibilities concerning family life overflowed into their hours of work. Conversely, the men seemed less often disturbed by family matters and were able to devote more time to work projects. Even though we directed the focus of analysis towards care and love labour for children, other responsibilities were mentioned, especially by women with and without children, such as caring for parents or vulnerable family members.

Theme 1: Love, care, and family life

Although loving and caring for family members are perceived to be rewarding endeavours, these can be time-consuming and emotionally exploitative activities (Daminger, 2019; Lynch, 2021). Some of the women interviewed explained how they felt they needed to prioritise family over work since their husbands did the opposite and prioritised their work. A mother of two recounted her experience of when her children were young, which was aligned with those of other women participants:

Really, I carried much more of the work related to family life. I worked shorter workweeks, and I felt that I always prioritised the home and the kids while he always prioritised work. It was not that he felt that some chores were not his—it was never like that; he just always prioritised his work. His focus was on building a career, and I think men's foci are often there. Their work is in control, and they are more focused on career progress than women; that's my feeling. I never doubted; I always prioritised the family, but he did not.

This woman bore an unequal share of the love labour, giving her husband extra time to focus on his career. This reflects the experiences of many of the women participants who felt that their husbands took advantage of their time and love labour to have the freedom for career advancement. These women felt that they did not have the same freedom, as they were responsible for taking care of their family members' well-being. This underlines how the unequal gendered division of labour disproportionately benefits men and frees up their time to focus on their careers, while women attend to unpaid labour and care for family members (Bryson, 2007, 2014; Lynch, 2021).

The only father who talked specifically about prioritising his family over work was an academic father in his late 40s who had established his career before becoming a father. He said:

I'm old, and I have very young children, you know. I'm going to enjoy spending time with them. Well, I'm not that old, but I'm still older than most fathers.... But it's of course good that I'm in the position to be able to prioritise the family. I wasn't there when I was in the precarious position of lecturer and didn't have a secure full-time academic position. It wouldn't have been possible for me.

In this interview, as in many others with the men, the participant speaks as if he had the liberty to decide whether to prioritise care and love labour. Conversely, the women did not express the freedom to make such a choice. This indicates a difference in perspective and mindset between men and women regarding who is responsible for love labour, and how undertaking primary care is not central to men's identity, as Lynch (2021) suggested.

Research indicates that women are more likely to reduce their working hours to meet their family's needs (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018); similarly in our research, many mothers, especially those working outside academia, explained how they reduced their working hours while their children were young to ease the burden of everyday family requirements. A self-employed mother of three said, "While the kids were young, I always optimised my working hours so that I could be home early." On the contrary, the men often explained how they had only attempted to reduce their working hours after they had established careers, and their children were older. For example, when asked about his typical work week, a father of three offered the following description.

Yes, I work a lot. Yes, but you might say that I don't work nearly as much now compared to how much I used to work. Over the years, it has been, yes, a lot of work, but now, it is becoming better balanced. Well, I'm not there yet but getting there.

A well-defined pattern that appeared in the interviews is that women took a step back from their careers to care for young children, while the men in their lives got the opportunity to focus on their early careers, as was confirmed by a father of two: "I'm a workaholic; that's the way it is, but that wouldn't be possible without my wife, who backs that up. We couldn't both work like I do." This coheres with Acker's (1990) conceptualisation of the ideal worker alluded to above: typically men, fully committed to their jobs, and devoid of personal responsibilities. In several interviews, the men participants shared that their wives supported them, taking on the responsibility for love labour and therefore allowing them to work longer hours; thus women taking on the role of "facilitating wives" as outlined by Ehrstein (2022), and confirming Jónasdóttir's (2011, 2018) concept of love power explaining the persistence of gender roles in relationships.

Some of the men argued that their wives freely and automatically slowed the progression of their own careers to support their families and their husbands' careers. However, most of the women did not indicate that their ideal choice was to support their husbands' careers rather than their own. On the contrary, they wanted their husbands to take on more responsibility in the home. This indicates that despite Icelandic men welcoming changes in gender relations (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018), normative ideas of hegemonic masculinity still influence these relations and, in line with Connell's (2005) argument, patterns of practices of patriarchy continue to benefit men.

Despite flexible working hours being generally available in academia, the women working in academia were more likely to describe their lives as highly constrained compared to those working outside academia. The academic women, especially those newly hired in tenure-track positions, found it most difficult to reduce working hours while meeting career demands. Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra's (2013) research showed that while

work flexibility can be beneficial for both men and women, it can also reinforce traditional gender roles and gendered power dynamics since women are more likely to use their flexibility to attend to family, which seemed to be the case in our study.

Both academic and nonacademic mothers often found it difficult to draw the line between work and family life since they felt responsible for providing love labour and ensuring the well-being of the family. An example of this was provided by mothers who described how they were pulled into family matters while at work. On the contrary, the fathers rarely mentioned family life interrupting work. A father of two even stated, “Yes, yes, I bring my family life into work, and I, you know, I don’t find that very difficult. No, and if my wife calls, I take the call. But I always try to keep the lines relatively clear.” The men were more likely than the women to explain how they organised their time in ways that kept the division between work and family clear, emphasising that they felt more in control of their time use (Bryson, 2007).

Theme 2: Being lucky but feeling guilty

Scholars have argued that the feeling of guilt has become synonymous with the idea of good mothering (see e.g., Collins, 2021). Accordingly, the mothers in our study described feelings of guilt caused by the tension from having to navigate work and family obligations. They felt guilty for not spending enough time with their children and for not being attentive and caring enough; although they would devote time at work to arrange their family’s schedule, make sure everybody’s lives ran smoothly, and ensure that their children were happy. In line with Bryson’s (2014) and Lynch’s (2021) findings, ours showed that the schedule of caregiving did not conform to the traditional capitalist notion of working hours. Nor did the mental work of keeping the family organised, happy, and well (Daminger, 2019; Dean et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2019).

Simultaneously, the mothers felt guilty about not being productive enough at work or spending too much time at the office on weekends. A mother of two who worked in academia stated that she began experiencing less guilt from working late or during the weekends when her children grew older, despite them still needing attention: “I need to be at work, but then, ‘oh no, the kids need something,’ and I need to go home to help my son prepare for an exam or something. You know, you become very torn sometimes.” The same mother explained how part of the guilt was from her children straightforwardly describing their displeasure at her being at work: “It is difficult. Like yesterday, my daughter said, surprised, ‘Why are you going into work today? It’s a holiday!’ You know, I’ve heard these kinds of sentences from my son as well.”

None of the fathers expressed similar feelings of guilt in this way or described their children complaining about their long working hours, disclosing that their wives were the primary caregivers in their families, thereby reproducing the gendered division of labour and burdening women with the emotionally demanding and time-consuming care work (Lynch, 2021). In fact, when asked about the division of household labour and childrearing tasks, the men explained how household chores were divided, while hardly any specifically discussed how childcare and love labour were divided. If they discussed their children specifically, they mostly referred to their wives handling more of

these responsibilities. A father of two explained, “Well, I mostly cook, and I do some of the laundry, but my wife is more, well, she takes care of all the communication with the kids’ schools and things like that.” A father of one similarly explained his situation: “I would say, if anything, my wife attends more to our daughter’s needs, but the household chores are more or less equal.” In other words, the love labour was mostly provided by his wife while housework was equally divided between the couple. This is an example underlining mothers’ shouldering of love labour in family life, labour that requires mental and emotional efforts and often goes unnoticed, as discussed and theorised by (among others) Daminger (2019) and Robertson et al. (2019).

Many of the women talked about how “lucky” they were because their husbands were involved around the house or were understanding of their long working hours. An academic mother of one said, “I just have an incredibly understanding husband, and sometimes, we just accept that everything is a mess [laughs], and we just don’t have people over and things like that.” However, she later shared the following:

Even though I’m lucky with my man, you know, there are certain things I must take care of, I mean, to be attentive to make appointments with the doctor and all that, things that men somehow just don’t do; well yes, they take care of the car.

Two points are worth noting here. First, like many of the other women interviewees, this woman considered herself “fortunate” because her husband participated in household labour and, in this case, supported her by acknowledging that there were times when she could not take care of household chores. For the women to have seen themselves as successful in this context means that they have friends or acquaintances whose husbands do not provide such support. Therefore, these women did not take this for granted. The other point is that tasks classified under love labour nevertheless rested on her shoulders, while her husband was responsible for more “concrete” things, such as the car.

As stated earlier, many of the mothers shared similar stories. For example, when asked about the division of labour, an academic mother of two said, “It’s good. I’m very lucky my husband was very well-raised [laughs], so it has been quite equal from the beginning.” When expressing such sentiments of gratitude and fortune out loud, the women often laughed almost apologetically.

Interestingly, none of the fathers expressed feeling lucky because their wives shouldered the burden of caring for the family and engaging in paid labour. Although they did speak fondly of their wives, they did not use terms such as “lucky” or “fortunate.” They seemed to assume that women shouldering the burden of love labour was the norm, supporting how affective relations are rooted in power relations and how capitalist societies have created cultural systems that associate social reproduction with women, and economic production with men (Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2001).

Rather, this gendered arrangement of labour was frequently individualised. For example, a father of three working outside academia whose wife also had a higher

degree explained that, in his opinion, the gendered division of labour in their home was intentional and by choice:

I have seen around us, among couples in similar positions, both with graduate degrees and so on, that it's very common that the wives choose to take on the bigger share of the family life. It is a conscious decision. I think it is first and foremost driven by how people want their family life to be organised. To some degree, I think, women want ... I mean, there is not necessarily equality when it comes to the parenting of children—toddlers.... This is influential, and I think that women, at least I see this in our circles, they choose to do it like this. It is their choice, and that's how they want to have it.

It is worth considering the idea of choice in this context. From the women participants' perspectives, being responsible for the love labour and the care of their family was not a matter of choice; they did not have the freedom to make such a decision. Instead, they experienced this more as a requirement imposed upon them by societal expectations for the gendered division of labour that have developed over time, without any intentional or informed discussions with their partners. These experiences are aligned with Finnish findings indicating that when couples become parents, their redefined roles become more traditional (Sevón, 2012). These experiences also underline patterns of a gendered division of labour which, despite the highly gendered outcome, are often perceived as gender-neutral and explained as a matter of choice, personal strength, or efficiency (Daminger, 2020). However, some of the mothers participating explained how they had tried to reorient the division of labour. One mother described her experience of completing her doctoral degree while taking care of young children:

When I was just about to finish my PhD, during the last year, I just felt that I couldn't keep hold of everything—all the kids' extracurricular activities, going to the doctor and all that, and the things around the house. Yes, it somehow had just developed like that, so I just had to say [to my husband], "I can't do this. I can't keep track of everything!" I had completely dropped all the balls on the floor. Nobody showed up at the right time anymore, and family life was a total mess.

It was not until she "gave up" that her husband stepped in. Other mothers in the study who also considered themselves "the lucky ones" shared similar stories. A mother of two working outside academia explained how revealing it was to divorce her ex-husband, as that made their care responsibilities more equal:

In fact, I had more time to work after we divorced. Then, he contributed something, at least every other weekend [when the children stayed with him]. You know, it doesn't necessarily tell the whole story, having a man on the sideline [laughter].

This quote shows that every other weekend, when the children were with their father, she was able to step back from providing love labour to take what she considered a

much-needed break. During their marriage, her male partner did not contribute to love labour, but rather added to her responsibilities, making it more challenging for her.

Theme 3: Gendered career paths

Many of the participants established families and had children during their PhD studies, which often impacted mothers and fathers differently. Notably, more mothers only started their doctoral studies when their children grew out of being toddlers. Some mothers described how trying to combine motherhood and their studies slowed the progression of their careers, as has been revealed in other research (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021). A mother of two working outside academia reflected on those hectic times: “Yes, it slowed me down. It certainly slowed me down.... And I decided to extend my studies. You know, I could extend my grant to reduce the stress and work shorter workdays.” Although most of the men had children while completing their PhDs, none discussed having to prolong their studies. On the contrary, some described how they became more responsible and focused on finishing their degrees. For instance, a father of two offered the following perspective.

Well, people thought we were crazy [having kids], but it worked out surprisingly well; it made me more focused. I became more effective in my work, the research I was working on, and my writing. I became more organised, timewise, and stopped chatting with my colleagues in the breakroom, without becoming isolated. So, I think it increased my feeling of responsibility, to have a child you need to provide for.

In highlighting that he became more focused and organised when his first child was born during his PhD studies, he touched upon the stereotypical gendered idea of being the provider as the man of the family. This suggests that the men participants perceived their main contribution as being providers, underlining how capitalism has reinforced the legitimised value order (Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2001; Lynch, 2021), emphasising the mothers’ roles as the primary providers of care and love labour, and men’s more care-free experiences (Lynch, 2021).

In line with having to shoulder the responsibilities of family life, the women participants’ careers tended to progress at a slower pace. Despite the interview results reflecting the social structures underpinning gender (in)equalities, the women participants explained their situations at the individual level, blaming themselves for not doing enough or referring to perceived deficiencies in their characters or abilities, individualising gendered structures (Daminger, 2020). The women participants working outside academia explained not feeling fearless enough to pursue higher positions in their fields or intentionally not aiming higher. In academia, women participants explained how it took longer for them to become full professors, blaming themselves and saying, “I should have been more targeted about research productivity” or “I should have been more daring about publications.” Somehow, they overlooked, or were unwilling to accept, how having to provide love labour and care resulted in gendered outcomes in their career trajectories.

Conclusion

In this article, we focused on the impact of having to provide love labour and care on the career trajectories of men and women doctorate holders working in and outside academia, which is the novel contribution of this research. Considering Iceland's success in bridging gaps in gender equality (The World Economic Forum, 2023), it is an interesting setting for studying the gendered experiences of highly educated individuals, as it might be expected that education per se (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Casey, 2009) and the gender regime reduce tension and promote equality between women and men in terms of work and family life. This study offers new insights by leveraging love labour and care as theoretical tools for analysing work–family balance and the career trajectories of doctorate holders working in and outside academia.

Jónasdóttir (2011, 2018) claimed that “love power” explains why men still dominate society despite good legal and formal equality. Despite Iceland's reputation for bolstering gender equality, our data reflected gendered trends, especially regarding the provision of love labour, which, unlike care labour, cannot easily be outsourced (Lynch, 2021). The women interviewed discussed the struggle to balance the challenging jobs they loved with attending to the well-being of their children and the family.

Nevertheless, the women drew on ideas of “being lucky” to have their husbands' support with household chores. Being grateful is a well-known strategy for maintaining mental wellness. However, this approach also individualises the situation and may perpetuate the belief that men are not required to take on family responsibilities. The fact that the interviewed men did not express constant feelings of guilt, like all the participating mothers did, underlines ideas about who is accountable for family well-being and how feeling guilty has become synonymous with good mothering (Collins, 2021).

In line with Bryson (2014) and Lynch (2021), our results show that the schedule of caregiving did not conform with the traditional capitalist notion of working hours, nor did the mental work of keeping the family organised, happy, and well (Damingier, 2019; Dean et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2019). The findings provide insights into the ongoing challenges that women doctorate holders encounter and add to the knowledge of how love labour increases emotional burden. They show that, despite the widespread dual-earner model in Iceland, men prioritise their careers, indicating that they view their main role as being the providers for their families. This affords them more time and mental space than is the case for equally qualified women to establish their careers. While some of the men participants viewed this division of labour as a matter of personal choice for women, the women felt that their options were limited, as they were expected to provide love and care for their families. This resulted in constant feelings of guilt, since they felt they could do better, both at work and at home.

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