

# Women Faculty on the Tenure Track: The Compounding Role of Being the Breadwinner

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***Abstract:** This study highlights the compounding challenge of women being breadwinners for their household while striving to earn tenure within gendered structures of faculty life. Findings are based on a longitudinal qualitative study of women faculty's experiences at two research universities in the United States. A critical feminist and agency lens contributed to analysis of participants' experiences.*

***Keywords:** women, faculty, breadwinner*

## Introduction

Imagine you are a woman faculty member—newly hired for a salary that is lower than your male counterparts and in a tenure track assistant professor position that women disproportionately leave before promotion for reasons such as lower satisfaction, a sexist campus climate, and heavier teaching and service loads that can impede research productivity. You are aware the position has a six-year probationary period, and if you do not meet expectations you will be asked to leave the university. In order for you to take

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an academic job, your partner left a position to move across the country with you and is searching for new opportunities—though without support or resources from your new employer. Your children have been uprooted to new schools, and you are now farther away from family and social support systems. Thus, in addition to earning tenure in order to remain a viable academic, your household's financial viability depends upon your ability to earn tenure in a system that was not built for you. Described here are some of the challenges women faculty face as their household's breadwinner in the context of a historically and traditionally male context.

For example, tenure-track faculty work—traditionally defined as research, teaching, and service—is distributed and weighted “based on culturally imbedded beliefs and assumptions about gender” (Maranto & Griffin, 2010, p. 2). Although the demands of tenure-track faculty life are universal, women are more negatively affected by the gendered organization of faculty life compared to White male counterparts (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). The gendered organization of the academy is illustrated through disproportionate numbers of tenured and full-professor women faculty compared to men (Christman, 2003; Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster, 1998; Glazer-Raymo, 2001; Jobe, 2004; Moody, 2004; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000; Trautvetter, 1999), a lack of critical mass of mentors for women faculty (August & Waltman, 2004), a chilly (i.e., sexist) climate (Acker & Armenti, 2004), a devaluing of women faculty's research (Glazer-Raymo, 2001), and ways in which women faculty's intersecting identities such as race present additional challenges to their experience (Kelly & McCann, 2013, 2014). Moreover, assumptions about women faculty often result in their relegation to “historically undervalued and underrecognized relational and domestic functions of academic work” (Terosky, O'Meara, & Campbell., 2014, pp. 59-60) such as heavier service workloads and teaching responsibilities (August & Waltman, 2004; Gardner, 2013).

Underexplored in research on the gendered organization of faculty life—and, at times, explicitly left out of higher education research due to limitations of a study's scope (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006)—is a focus on women faculty who are their household's breadwinner. The quantitative higher education literature explores faculty salary and gender from the perspective of the "gendered wage gap" and provides compelling disparities in salary of women faculty compared to men (Nettles, Perna, Bradburn, & Zimbler, 2000; Perna, 2000, 2003; Toutkoushian, 1998; Umbach, 2007; U. S. Department of Education, 2012). However, what is missing from the literature is research that explores qualitative experiences behind these statistics. Thus, this study focuses on a unique finding from a longitudinal study on women faculty members' experiences on the tenure track at two research extensive universities in the United States. This study's primary research question asks: How, if at all, did the role of being a household's breadwinner contribute to the gendered organization of faculty life for tenure track women faculty at a research extensive university? To understand the phenomenon of women faculty who were breadwinners, we applied a critical feminist lens and the concept of 'agency' (O'Meara, Campbell, & Terosky, 2011; O'Meara, 2015). While research exists that focuses on women faculty's agency in their experience in a gendered organization, only rarely has a critical feminist lens been used in tandem (Kelly, McCann, & Porter, 2018). Moreover, in O'Meara's (2015) qualitative study of 37 women faculty, a focus on agency in research university contexts is "especially important" (p. 332) in that the gendered organization of faculty life enables accumulated disadvantages for women faculty's career advancement through mediators of segregated work roles, less access to career sponsors, and "ideal worker norms embedded in departments that devalue balance of work and family priorities" (p. 332). What is more, we agree with O'Meara's (2015) assessment that, "while there is clearly an extant body of work that has documented the disparities that grow from gendered organizations, there is only a limited body of work that has systematically addressed the ways in which women take agency" (p. 332).

## **Literature Review**

To foreground the gendered organization of faculty life and its impact on women faculty breadwinners we focus on the concept of “the ideal worker”. Such a focus highlights a prototypical worker that is valued by the academy. By scaffolding this archetype, how women faculty who are breadwinners may or may not have agency in a male dominated academy is further understood.

### **Ideal Worker**

The ideal worker is one who is dedicated completely to the workplace and free from outside responsibilities—including being free from personal and family responsibilities (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 2003; Drago & Williams, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hochschild, 1989). According to Sallee (2012), “While certainly either men or women could fulfill the role of the ideal worker . . . women typically perform more of the childcare responsibilities in the home and thus are those who are often excluded from living up to the norms of the ideal worker” (p. 784). Furthermore, in the context of women faculty, “A faculty member looking to establish her career in the face of conflicting time demands between workplace and home may not be able to be an ideal academic worker” (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012, p. 7).

For this study in particular, women faculty as breadwinners presents another way in which participants in this study differed from an ideal worker and experienced unique challenges to be “good workers” and “good women” on the tenure track. One way to show this tension is through the relationship between research on dual-career couples and academic motherhood compared to the ideal worker prototype.

### **The ideal worker and partners**

Drawn from findings in Hochschild’s (1989) in-depth qualitative study of 50 couples that uncovered a “second shift” that women perform in the home after a work day, the concept of the ideal worker does not account for both partners desiring to work and

have a career as a dual-career couple. Conversely, the ideal worker model assumes the worker is male, makes a wage to support a family, and has a partner at home who attends to household duties and childcare (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Men are traditionally thought to be a household's breadwinner (Emslie & Hunt 2009), and women stereotypically shoulder more of the household and caretaking responsibilities (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Emslie & Hunt 2009). In Sallee's (2012) study on academic fatherhood, several studies suggested that men's productivity and role as a good father is to support their children and household through economic means solely.

Other research on dual career couples reflected additional challenges. For example, dual career faculty may experience delayed career advancement (Moen & Sweet, 2002) and income because of the need to take non-preferred positions (Quinn & Rubb, 2010). For instance, Moen and Sweet (2002) found it was more difficult for dual career couples to change jobs because they also had to consider their partner's career. Dual career couples experience an added stressor compared to those in single-searches, as "marriage frequently results in a sub-optimal job search" (Quinn & Rubb, 2010, p. 37). Dual career couples may also have decreased performance in the workplace because of lack of satisfaction with partner either not finding a position, being underemployed, not in fulfilling position, or living long-distance away.

Some institutions have resources to assist faculty with partner hires. For instance, respondents to a survey on dual career couples noted how assisting in helping spouses or domestic partners of faculty hires increased faculty morale, compensated for low salaries and assisted families (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, & Rice, 2000). As one participant in their study noted, "our university is committed to 'family values'—easing stress/pressures on academic couples who both seek employment, especially if they must relocate" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2000, p. 301). Sexual orientation is an additional factor, as previous research on academic dual career

couples showed that heterosexual “couples who attempt ‘rational’ career decisions often find themselves favoring the husband’s career” (Bird & Bird, 1987, p. 98). Although same-sex couples can legally marry in the U.S. as of June 26, 2015, historically, “primary” hires in same-sex couples had less negotiating power with an institution compared to heterosexual male counterparts (Miller & Skeen, 1997). Adding to how partnered women breadwinners diverge from an ideal worker is motherhood.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Policies and practices of the academy are acted out on real bodies, and for this study women were the ultimate “knowers” of the impact that gender and breadwinner status had on their tenure track experiences. To unpack the women faculty experiences on the tenure track, we drew upon tenets of critical feminist theory and agency. These lenses authorize gender, the academy’s history and context, and power as mediators of human experience, respectively. “First, the critical feminist perspective is not about comparing women’s experiences to men” (Bensimon & Marshall, 2000, p. 138). Feminist research compels researchers to “consider the ways in which gender norms are maintained or disrupted by current institutional practices” (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011, p. 671)—in this case, the tenure track and how gender interacts with that institution practice. What makes the lens a critical look at gender is its focus on power. Research has been compelling in noting how women lack power because of sexist, gendered assumptions embedded in academy policy and practice. Women tend to lack power because their status as pre-tenured essentially has them in a probationary period where the tenured faculty and administrators are judging whether the pre-tenure women faculty are worthy of a lifetime, tenured appointment.

Women’s experiences are valuable sources of understanding the gendered aspects of the academy, but also as individual agents who have power over their research, teaching and service performance. Agency, as defined by O’Meara and

Stromquist (2015), entails “perspectives and actions taken by participants to achieve meaningful goals” (p. 340). Agency also acknowledges “the need for both individual and collective action” and is specific to a given context or organizational environment (p. 340). In this study, the context is the academy and the area is the tenure track within the institution of the academy. From an agency lens, we focused this study on perspectives and behaviors that women faculty breadwinners exhibited relative to their ultimate goal of earning tenure. Founded on the theoretical and empirical conceptualization of agency from scholars in sociology, psychology, and human development (e.g., Archer 2000; Ganz, 2010; Marshall, 2000), we operationalize agency as “strategic and intentional views or actions toward goals that matter to the professor” (Terosky et al., 2014, p. 61). Agentic perspectives are shaped by social contexts and refer to ways in which one interprets situations relative to a goal—such as career advancement—and often function as “a response to barriers and opportunities” (O’Meara, 2015, p. 333). Agentic behavior or action “consists of individuals asserting free will and influencing their own life trajectories through strategic tasks or steps” (Terosky et al., 2014, p. 62). Thus, in relationship to this study, the context in which women sought to advance their career was the tenure track at a research university. Agentic perspectives and behaviors were relative to women’s goals of earning tenure and supporting their households as the breadwinner. This conceptual framework holds that women faculty participant’s experiences are meaningful, that their experiences occur in a particular power and gendered context, and that their agency may be challenged or supported as a result.

## Methods

Because we were interested in the meaning women gave to their experiences on the tenure track, a qualitative approach was appropriate. In Christman’s (2003) synthesis of the literature on women faculty, she argued, “the academy must commit to an honest attempt to understand women faculty members’ experiences” (p. 10). Assumptions of qualitative research include

interpreting phenomena for how people make meaning of them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Specifically, we relied on a phenomenological method for data collection and analysis. According to van Manen (1990), “What first characterizes phenomenological research is that it always begins in the lifeworld” (p. 7). Extended, multiple phenomenological interviews were the primary mode of understanding the essence of participants’ ‘lifeworlds’ on the tenure track

### **Data Sources and Data Collection**

For the purpose of understanding the experiences of women faculty, we recruited women on the tenure track at two public doctoral universities—one in New England and one in the mid-Atlantic. Through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was used to set up criteria for participants that would provide the richest data (Patton, 2002). For our study, this was faculty who identified as women, was appointed as a full-time, and was on the tenure track at a doctoral institution. Participants were recruited with the assistance of administrators in the Provost’s Office and The Center for Excellence in Teaching, respectively. Ultimately, 22 tenure track assistant professors consented to the larger Women in the Academy study, and participants consisted of seven women of color and 15 White women. The Women in the Academy study is a longitudinal research project that interviewed women from year one through one year after tenure (ended earlier for women who did not earn tenure; approximately 4-5 total interviews per women faculty member in the study) and sought to understand why women faculty disproportionately leave the tenure track before earning tenure.

Within the larger Women in the Academy study, we identified ten participants who experienced being their household’s breadwinner at one or more points during their time on the tenure track (see Table 1). Such participants emerged due to distinct themes related to their experiences compared to others in this study who did not identify as their household’s breadwinner. Of the ten



participants, seven were employed in one institution and three in the other. Additionally, all ten participants worked in fields that are traditionally lower paying such as hearing/speech sciences, education, counseling, sociology, English, and social work. This coincidence enhanced our ability to study the phenomenon of interest given this rich concentration of data (Merriam, 2009). Put another way, perhaps themes related to participants' breadwinner experiences were more salient given the lower-paying fields in which they worked compared to how themes might have emerged had they worked in historically higher-paying fields such as the sciences or medicine. The participants also held different intersecting identities that impacted their experience (e.g. race, nationality, sexual orientation). Of the ten participants, two were U.S. faculty of color, one was an international faculty member of color, and one was a White woman in a same-sex marriage. The remaining six women were White and in different-sex marriages.

Given the few number of participants in each field, it was not possible to analyze experiences based on discipline/field differences, both in terms of department/college culture as the study was focused on the examination of women faculty's experiences in public doctoral universities. This decision was made because "the disparity at doctoral universities [is] particularly striking (only one-fourth of tenured faculty were women)" (Philipsen, 2008, p. 1). Moreover, according to Perna (2001), although salaries at doctoral universities are associated with higher salaries relative to other institution types, new assistant professors experience the lowest salaries at doctoral institutions. The sample used for this study is a rich site for data analysis, given our participants' status as women assistant professors at doctoral universities.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Race/Nationality/ Sexuality</b>	<b>Kids</b>	<b>Partner Status at Time of Hire</b>	<b>Partner Status Change</b>	<b>Tenurec</b>
Angela	Sociology	White/ U.S./ Heterosexual	2	Looking for work	Graduate school for career switch	Yes
Diana	Education	Filipino/ U.S./ Heterosexual	2	Looking for work	Partner changed fields & found work	Yes
Carrie	Education	White/ U.S./ Hetero-sexual	2	Looking for full- time faculty work	Part-time adjunct work	Yes
Eva	Education	Filipino/ Philippines/ Heterosexual	2	Looking for work	No change	No
Kathy	Education	White/ U.S./ Heterosexual	4	In failing self- employed business	Found work in related area	Yes
Kayla	Counseling	White/ U.S./ Heterosexual	2	Looking for work	Found work in related area	No
Kendall	Education	Chinese/ U.S./ Hetero-sexual	0	Looking for full- time faculty work	Graduate school for career switch	Yes
Stacey	Social Work	White/ U.S./ Lesbian	2	Partner in part- time work	No change	Yes
Sydney	English	White/ U.S./ Heterosexual	3	Looking for full- time faculty work	Part-time adjunct work	Yes
Tina	Hearing & Speech Sciences	White/ U.S./ Heterosexual	2	Partner looking for work	Partner changed fields & found work	No

Following a longitudinal research design, semi-structured, phenomenological interviews with an open protocol were the primary sources of data in this study. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), “A semi-structured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives . . . with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 27). Participants were interviewed every year of their tenure track until one year after tenure or one year after they departed the institution. Participants in this study participated in an average of five audio-recorded, hour-long interviews and responded to seven questions that pertained to their experience on the tenure track each year. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and all transcripts

were read and re-read as a preliminary stage before coding. The first stage of coding involved analyzing transcripts in order to describe and interpret women faculty experiences. Second, we coded for experiences related to a gendered organization in the academy and third we analyzed transcripts from a power and agency lens. The data were categorized into themes, and commonalities and disparities within and across participants' experiences were noted.

### **Measures to Increase Trustworthiness**

We employed several strategies to both increase the accuracy of our study (Creswell, 2013) and to attend to our positionality as researchers. To enhance trustworthiness of the study, we individually reviewed transcripts and came to independent conclusions on the themes that emerged. We relied on intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2013) to increase reliability of the study. For example, after coding the first transcripts separately, we met and came to agreement on what code was assigned to key passages in participants' transcripts. At each stage of data analysis, we had a colleague check interpretations, categories, and themes that emerged. This colleague was a woman faculty member from a different department and cultural background than the researchers. Our independent coding and subsequent analytical conversations with a colleague and with each other increased credibility in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The analytic conversations also enabled us to address our researcher bias (Creswell, 2013). Our identities as women of color with partners were essential to our positionality throughout conceptualizing, conducting, and analyzing the study. As we read the literature about women faculty with partners we sought to understand how White and women of color were experiencing the reality of being the breadwinner. One author experienced being the breadwinner for her partner and children after earning tenure. She reflected on how race, gender and her position of tenured professor shaped her experience as a breadwinner to bring

awareness of her perspective as different from those seeking tenure in this study. For the other author, as a woman of color with a partner, she identified with the highlights and challenges participants experienced in relationship to race and gender; yet, she did not hold the position of a tenure track faculty member and did not hold the role of breadwinner in her relationship. Thus, we were both outside of the experience participants in this study had of working toward tenure while being a breadwinner, but inside in some ways of being women, women of color, and in the faculty role (for one author). Our ongoing researcher reflexivity (Creswell, 2013) and data analysis strategies enhanced the trustworthiness and reliability of the study (Creswell, 2013). Themes that emerged from coding transcripts were the basis for the findings reported for this study.

### **Findings**

Although the original intention of the longitudinal study did not include the explicit focus on women faculty as breadwinners, salient themes related to this status emerged when participants described their professional challenges. Through these descriptions of professional challenges, the 10 women breadwinners discussed how being the household breadwinner impacted their tenure track experiences.

Based on that rich data, four themes emerged around how they behaved relative to their role as breadwinners and the agency they enacted. The first three themes related to the participants' agentic behaviors: (a) feeling "stuck" or remaining in faculty roles that did not bring them job satisfaction because of their obligation as household breadwinner; (b) an inability to navigate certain challenges they faced on the tenure track due to unsupportive universities; and (c) altering their behavior in the presence of their partner due to gendered norms around breadwinner status.

The fourth theme, related to participants' agentic perspectives, was (d) how women faculty in the study navigated

challenges through changing their perception. Participants focused on the ‘flexible’ nature of their job, administrators who they perceived as more supportive than others, the satisfaction they gained from family relationships and support; and finding meaning in their research and teaching. These agentic perspectives could be considered buffers to challenges that inhibited women’s ability to take action to advance their careers and support their families. Women participants reframed the perception of challenges they faced as a household breadwinner in order to survive on the tenure track.

### **Feeling Stuck – “If You’re Supporting Your Whole Family You’re Really Stuck”**

Of the 22 women in the larger study, the 10 women faculty who identified themselves as breadwinners all expressed an additional layer of pressure to remain as viable candidates on the tenure track. Participants were determined to earn tenure whether they were satisfied with their job and desired to apply for different positions or not. Put another way, although all women in the study wanted to earn tenure so as to remain in the academy and advance their research agendas and teaching practices, those who were breadwinners felt an additional pressure to make decisions about actions they would or would not take related to their career in order to allow their families to survive financially.

Several examples highlight how women participant’s ability or inability to take action was shaped by their role as household breadwinner. Kayla shared how she experienced additional pressure to remain in her faculty role, because “it was kind of getting to a crisis point” mid-way through her tenure track journey when her partner was out of work for one year. Kayla also felt heightened pressure to be successful in her position because she uprooted her family from their hometown for her job. She said, “Well I wouldn’t say they’re [her family] rooting for me. Everybody kind of hates the fact that we moved here . . . mostly my son, who’s just turned 16, and my husband who’s still trying to

find a job down here.” Diana also remarked about supporting her partner who was looking for work and their two kids, “the financial piece is hard. We would love to travel more but it’s really hard for us. We’re limited...because I have a teacher salary.” Sydney’s partner was also looking for a full-time job when they moved for her career. Sydney noted how her success on the tenure track was tied to her ability to start a family. As she shared, “So, I mean the financial stuff has been very difficult . . . I have to say I’m right now deciding if I can have another kid in terms of tenure . . . and that just to me seems awful to have to make that decision.”

Sydney also described how her sense of free will relative to her job was impacted by her role as breadwinner,

I mean you always hear faculty are men supporting you know stay at home wives, and it’s true. It’s not a well-paid profession, so it’s sort of you’re really in a double bind because you’re not making that much money, and then if you’re supporting your whole family you’re really stuck.

Tina faced a similar challenge to her agentic action or behavior when, midway through the tenure process, she realized she would thrive better at an institution that valued teaching more or equal to research productivity. However, because she already uprooted her family and committed to her role as the family’s breadwinner in a tenure track role, she thought that she could not apply for jobs elsewhere. Tina explained,

Well I think I might have considered it [applying for a different tenure track job] if I was in a different state in my life . . . And there are several factors, personal factors, that would prevent me from doing that. One of the biggest one is that my husband is doing very well at his job here, and it would not be a good time for us to pick up and uproot him from his position. He basically moved to [name of state] for me, quit his job, and happened to get the job he’s in now . . . You know we moved here for my job . . . And the

honest thing is I have two kids, and I have a lot of family in the region.

Related to Tina's perspective of being stuck in her tenure track job due to being the family's breadwinner and being able to rely on family support to assist with childcare, Carrie remarked,

Realizing I'm the primary wage earner in our family, and you know if I don't get to keep my job then a lot of people are counting on me . . . I made a commitment to move here and this is the third place I've been to, and I'm kind of tired of moving. So it's not so much like, you know if I didn't get tenure, okay. Pack up the kid, and sell the house and move again.

Although Carrie was less worried about "finding another job or anything like that"—and even felt confident she could "probably even apply for associate jobs"—she did not want to put her family through additional stress of moving again and enduring the stress of her partner trying to search for a new job. Angela was in a similar situation as her partner was out of work and back in school to change career paths. If tenure did not work out she stated she would not "have it in me to do the push for tenure at another place." Like Tina and Carrie, for Angela, "There's no way I would have moved the kids, because I think it would have been too hard on them, and I had already moved them from Colorado to Ohio and Ohio to here..."

Slightly counter to the women breadwinners who believed they could not take action to move to a new job due to their role as breadwinner, other women were open to uprooting their families again if it meant they could be a more stable breadwinner in the long-term. Eva—who viewed "the financial piece" as the "biggest challenge" for her on the tenure track—worried, "Will we have enough savings in the bank? You know the survival piece is still there." She also felt additional "stress and pressure of finding another source of income" during the summer as she navigated the

“basic need to be able to earn enough to support your family.” A few years into her tenure journey, this stress got to the point where she questioned whether the institution was a place where she could be successful and earn tenure, and this compelled her to start searching for other jobs. Eva asserted,

I continue to support the family, but when you know that you’re just on a nine-month contract, and you have no source of income during the summers that leaves you with a zero balance by the beginning of fall. And it was just getting to be too much of an anxiety provoker and I began to think I might be earning more somewhere and be doing what I like.

In addition to ways in which women’s agentic behavior was impacted by their role as breadwinner—and in the context of a gendered academy—women’s agentic behavior was also affected by a lack of institutional support.

### **Unsupportive Universities—“You Know There’s the Family Medical Leave Act, But That’s Unpaid”**

Women also named a lack of institutional support—relative to their role as breadwinner—as a challenge to actions they wanted to take toward the goal of earning tenure. All the participants mentioned needing to take on extra paid work that ultimately distracted from their research productivity as faculty members.

For example, Sydney shared, “I mean our salaries don’t help. . . And so I know you don’t go into a profession for the money but it’s constantly I’m going ‘Is this really worth the compensation?’” Additionally, Tina said, “You know this summer I wasn’t paid. I got no salary this summer except for the course I taught . . . The rest of the time is supposed to – I’m unpaid, but I’m supposed to be focusing on my research.” Tina also commented, “We couldn’t afford to hire a nanny, and childcare is cripplingly expensive even if you don’t hire nannies.” Tina further explained,



[B]ecause I'm a 9 1/2 month employee, of course I get no annual leave. I get only sick leave, and they don't have a maternity leave. You basically have to use your accumulated sick leave. You know there's the Family Medical Leave Act but that's unpaid. . . . I would love not to have to put her [child] into daycare until the summer if I could.

Like Tina, Eva's stress as the family's breadwinner was impacted by the terms of her nine-month contract. She stated, "I had expressed in the past how unhappy my family situation was because of the pressures we were experiencing financially. Being on a nine-month contract can put so much pressure especially when summer months start coming. And living in [New England region], it's just um a higher standard of living..." Eva noted how her status as an international tenure track faculty member on a work visa exacerbated her inability to take action to earn tenure and support her family,

I'm confined to your university, so I have no other source of income. I can't get extra for conferences or anything like that. Last, my husband cannot work [due to visa stipulations]. I'm the sole breadwinner of the family . . . [T]here's so many things going on which I feel [name of institution] could support us a little more by sort of being on top of that process. Stacey also felt unsupported by her institution due to the low salary she earned in the

context of "trying to raise these two kids and love them and support them and survive financially" and with her partner working part-time. Stacey asserted, that "even with the union," she "felt a very strong lack of support from the university by their fooling around over the salary negotiations." Stacey also shared,

I think that's absolutely inexcusable given what the salaries are and how low they are . . . Completely disrespectful . . . They [central administration] asked me to put time into

helping them with strategic planning . . . [N]othing happened, you know? . . . We owe the students more. We owe the faculty more. We owe the staff more than that, and we can do better.

Also, Stacey explained she was initially offered \$36,000 as an assistant professor and made \$50,000 as a doctoral student. To increase the offer, she “pushed and pushed and pushed and I pushed” to \$39,000. Yet, she remained frustrated, as “I learned enough from my doctoral program that the words and the music have to go together or you’re in the wrong place. And all the words were the right words, which drew me to that doctoral program, but the music was wrong.” She considered returning to “consulting work” on the side, but she decided, “It just doesn’t work you know? Nor do I want to be seen by other faculty as out doing other things rather than what I’m supposed to be doing.” In addition to not feeling supported by their institution as women faculty breadwinners due to financial strain and a lack of family leave policies—except for the Family Medical Leave Act that provided unpaid leave—the absence of support around their partner’s job search was also cited as a challenge to their agency to thrive on the tenure track.

Another challenge that impacted women’s agentic behavior stemmed from the fact that many of their partners were the accompanying partner and needed to find new work when they relocated. None of the women in this study were hired with a clause in their contract for a partner hire. Kayla, who began her tenure track role as a visiting assistant professor, drew upon her institution’s resources to help her partner find work. Kayla stated,

The university has this—an office that’s supposed to help the spouses of faculty. So I went to her [a staff member in the office], and my husband had tried connecting with them; but basically this woman gave him a list of websites for job searching...

While the institution did technically provide spousal support for faculty, the support Kayla's partner received was not helpful. This lack of support led Kayla to take further action, and she sought support from her dean despite hesitations around the power dynamic, as the dean would impact Kayla's tenure decision. Kayla shared,

The dean's husband works in the field [same field as Kayla's partner], and so I went to her to ask her just if she had any contacts either within the university or outside the university for him to follow up on . . . It was really difficult to both be trying to focus on doing a good job here and finishing my dissertation and dealing with him [Kayla's partner] . . . So anything the university could do . . . And her [dean] first response to me was 'Well I can't do anything for you. You haven't completed your doctorate and how long have you been here so far and you're still not done yet?' . . . What I think she was trying to say was there are resources in the university for faculty on tenure track for retention of faculty. Well I'm not on a tenure track technically

Although the institution endorsed Kayla's initial hire as a visiting assistant professor (before ultimately moving her into a tenure track assistant professor role), their lack of support for her partner's hire impeded her ability to take actions she needed to be successful in her job—such as complete her dissertation.

Eva also experienced a lack of support around her partner finding work and relayed the toll it took being a person of color in a state that severely lacked racial and ethnic diversity. She stated,

My husband's job search in [name of state] has been a very demeaning process. It did not take long for him to realize that his race and ethnicity were getting in the way of obtaining a job . . . When you live in a place where you have no voice, where you are considered invisible and

unimportant, it affects the way you view yourself as well as your outlook in life.

The lack of institutional support and one institution being in an overwhelmingly White area of the U.S., added strain of having partners who were out of work while these women faculty tried to be successful on the tenure track.

As alluded to in relationship to women participant's challenges to "making it work" with lower salaries and less than 12-month contracts, when women participants took action to seek out more income to help their families survive, this detracted from their ability to be successful on the tenure track. Of this challenge, Tina stated,

You know we were going around and around about who would teach it [an additional summer course in her department], and the real motivating factor for me was that my husband and I could really use the summer salary. You know cause your summer salary goes down, so you know it was really more of an economic decision. And I wish I wasn't making it . . . I need to be so focused on my research this summer and this is gonna take another six weeks away from [research].

Like Tina, Eva also needed to take on extra work to support her family, and this detracted from her productivity. She said, "And sometimes I'd take on two sections of 'Race and Culture' every semester and I would do that because that was my only way to compensate for the summer months when I wouldn't be employed."

Kathy also tried to find ways to manage paid work that could count toward her service on the tenure track. She stated, "So I don't feel like I would have to apologize to anyone cause I could—I know I can say without any hesitation 'Hey that worked...' Yeah it puts money on the table, and that's really

critical for me but it also informs my work as a professional.” Yet, Kathy shared, “if we were better compensated I wouldn’t need to do as much of that as I do.” As with the other women in this study, Kathy noted taking on extra work to support their households “has to diminish somewhat you’re ability to do the stuff that you’re primarily paid to do.” Katie said the extra paid work had “less to do with tenure than it just has to do with making ends meet.”

In addition to the practical strain that finding more sources of income put on the women’s ability to focus on the goal of earning tenure, these challenges also added a layer of psychological or emotional stress for the women participants. Although Tina wanted to take time away from teaching to focus more on her research, she wished that she could say, “I’m gonna be gone for the semester, and just don’t pay me.” Then Tina noted, “But then my husband and I would probably lose our house, and I don’t think they’d look on that real favorably here.” Also, for Eva, it was difficult for her “to think straight when you’re stressed out about life and making ends meet.” Another challenge to women participant’s agentic action or behavior relates to gendered norms around the breadwinner’s identity.

### **Responding to Gendered Norms—“And as a Man, It’s Almost Harder, Because It’s a Man Not Working”**

Different from relationship-related challenges that women in the larger study experienced—such as their partners not understanding the demands of tenure track faculty life—women breadwinners experienced strains on partnerships due to gendered norms around breadwinner status—(i.e., men or men-identified partners as the prototypical breadwinner). This strain resulted in women adjusting their perspectives on their accomplishments—such as a publication or a positive mid-tenure review. Instead of viewing their accomplishments with satisfaction or pride, they downplayed their success and felt guilty for their achievement. For example, Kathy who was “the main breadwinner for quite a few years” before her husband was offered a job shared,

I think a challenge for us is because a lot of times he sees himself as supporting my role, yet he sees me as the primary breadwinner. That creates some tension for us. It's created some tension about how he feels about what he does, and how the world perceives him. At times when I feel really good about work, sometimes I think it may diminish how he feels about his contribution to the family . . . And as a man, it's almost harder because it's a man not working.

Carrie also felt the need to protect her partner from her accomplishments as the family's breadwinner. She stated, "Yeah. He has a Ph.D. and he can't get an academic job, so I can't really you know – I don't like going home and saying, 'I'm great.' You know because it's a sore spot for him so." Diana, too, acknowledged her partner's "sacrifice" of quitting his job so they could move for her tenure track position. In her taking on the role as breadwinner she shared, "He really has made a big sacrifice . . . [H]e never blames me, but sometimes it has been hard now and then. . . . [H]e talks about, 'Well I feel like your life will still be starting and mine will be ending...'" Kendall also noted how—even though she was her household's breadwinner—her partner still wanted to prioritize his career. She stated,

The thing that makes me bitter about him though is he—you know as he looks for his job he is completely singularly focused on what it is that he wants. And he never really asks me like how is this gonna work with starting a family . . . Where are the good school systems? What's a decent commute for both of us?

In addition to challenges that inhibited or facilitated particular agentic behaviors, there was a final fourth theme related to women's agentic perspectives as they navigated the challenges of both earning tenure and being the household breadwinner.

### **Changing Perspective—“If I Only Cared About Money I Wouldn’t Be Doing This”**

In addition to the previously discussed themes, there were commonalities in how women breadwinners framed their experiences in the context of the challenges they faced to keep their families financially viable. Viewing their tenure track jobs as flexible, supportive senior administrators or colleagues, supportive families and partners, and finding meaning in their work as faculty collectively facilitated women’s ability to take action toward their goal of tenure in the context of their role as their household’s breadwinner.

To earn extra income, women breadwinners took advantage of the flexibility they perceived in their faculty role. Most of the women were nine-month salaried employees; consequently, to make ends meet they took on additional work to earn more income for the other three months of the year—even if this extra work detracted from their need to produce research. Kendall explained, “I went into higher ed because it’s portable.” Angela agreed that, “a perk is having a portable job...” and noted how her partner who was finishing a teacher education graduate program allowed them both to be teachers “which will be nice” due to having “so much time in the summer.” By ‘portable’, the women referred to the ways in which their work could be performed outside of one set space or time, which for them was a benefit.

In addition, although some women did not have the support of senior level administrators in easing the challenges of being the breadwinner right away in their career or at all, some perceived senior administrators as supportive relative to their goal of earning tenure. For example, toward the end of Eva’s tenure track experience, she built a strong relationship with a new dean. Eva said, “She’s given me an opportunity to have a research assistantship in places outside of our university where I could also receive extra income.” Furthermore, Tina discussed how the encouragement of a senior colleague to apply for a grant resulted

in a successful application. Tina stated, “So that was – the nice thing about that internal grant is it essentially gave me summer salary support without my having to teach so that I can focus 100% this summer on collecting data and writing, which is exactly what I have to do.”

Too, all of the women in this study repeatedly underscored the ways in which their partners or family members (e.g., children, parents) supported their path. This support mitigated women’s feelings of guilt toward pursuing a less financially lucrative career and, in some cases, uprooting their families to take the tenure track job. For example, Alice shared, “I mean I feel like I’m very lucky. I mean my husband is totally supportive.” Diana relayed how in her first year she got two publications out to journals and credited her partner being home with the kids so she had time to stay at work at write,

[M]y husband . . . is staying at home—and there’s no rush to do things before [kids are out of school]. And he’s also been very supportive. He knew that was my goal and he knows it’s my goal to get tenure so that I really think that played a great factor into my ability to finish that [journal articles].

Of her greatest support, Kathy also stated, “Family, my husband . . . shopping and a lot of cooking and a lot of laundry. He does a lot of transportation of kids, and that has been really, really helpful.” Tracy commented, “You feel like you’re just suffering in this little bubble . . . He is the greatest emotional support I have, and he’s been really wonderful and I think he’s as understanding as he can be.” Kayla, whose husband eventually became more supportive of her needing to move to a different institution to earn tenure shared, “And him being supportive of that [needing to apply for different jobs] so that I’m not feeling stuck. You know for a while, for a long while I think I was feeling stuck.”



Furthermore, when women in this study felt stressed about making ends meet, they reframed that challenge by reminding themselves of why they chose the career path of a tenure track faculty member. The meaning the women found usually circled back to was their love for research or for teaching their students. The role of students in women's career satisfaction is explored in more depth in another study based on the larger longitudinal study (Author, 2012). Kathy's comment exemplifies what most women landed on when they considered all of the challenges to thriving financially as a breadwinner and 'making it' on the tenure track. She stated, "And I do value—I do value this job tremendously, and if I only cared about money I wouldn't be doing this. I might be doing something in education but it wouldn't be working here."

### **Discussion**

Women faculty breadwinners are antithetical to how the tenure system was designed in the academy. The findings from this study support previous research on the gendered organization of faculty life (Kelly & Fetridge, 2012; Perna, 2003; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004) and add to what is known when the role of breadwinner is considered. Through the framework of agency in tandem with a critical feminist approach, this study provided a different lens through which to make meaning of participants' experiences. As shown in the findings, women faculty's agentic actions and perspectives were shaped by the gendered context of the academy and their identity as women breadwinners.

For instance, a lack of institutional support around partner hires and gendered norms around accompanying partners and breadwinners challenged women participant's ability to shape their career and work toward tenure. Embedded in this lack of support is arguably the gendered idea that male faculty's spouses work in the home and do not need gainful employment. Related to gendered norms around breadwinner identity, women exhibited agentic behaviors that downplayed their success on the tenure

track. The gendered notion that men should be the breadwinners and providers of their families was in tension with the reality of women's lives. This tension resonates with existing literature on the ideal worker who is male and untethered by outside responsibilities (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 2003; Drago & Williams, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Sallee, 2012; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

In addition, the model of nine-month contracts for tenure track faculty presumes that faculty can financially support themselves based on the salary earned during the academic year. This assumption does not take into consideration that the woman faculty member is the household breadwinner and further accentuates how such breadwinners differ from the ideal worker (Sallee, 2012). Nine-month contracts also worsen the impact of statistics that show women earn less salary than male counterparts (Perna, 2000; Umbach, 2007). In response to these institutional assumptions, participants exhibited agentic behaviors by seeking-out extra teaching and consulting in order to stay financially afloat. Participants also exhibited agentic behaviors that detracted from their goal of tenure, as they spent valuable summer months to earn money to support their families. These decisions were compounded by knowing if they did not earn tenure, their family members' sacrifice of quitting jobs, changing schools, and relocating were in vain.

Furthermore, women participants maintained particular agentic perspectives of faculty life in relationship to challenges they faced. Consistent with the literature on agency in academia (Campbell & O'Meara, 2013; O'Meara, 2015), agentic perspectives are typically a response to barriers and opportunities. Women in this study exhibited agentic perspectives in response to barriers to their success on the tenure track more so than to opportunities. For example, the women faculty cited supportive families and memories of why they initially entered the academy as agentic perspectives toward perceived barriers. Some participants viewed senior stakeholders in their institutions as

supportive—such as Eva’s new dean who enabled her to take on research-related work that also provided an opportunity to earn money; and Tina’s senior colleague who encouraged her to apply for a grant.

In addition, this study resulted in interpretations of agency relative to the extant literature. Agency has largely been researched from the perspective of White women faculty members (Campbell & O’Meara, 2013; O’Meara, 2015), but the ways in which women faculty in our study’s intersecting identities shaped their experience with agency is instructive. O’Meara (2015) noted that gender identity intersects with race, nationality, discipline, and family status that may limit the privilege and use of agency in the faculty role. Unlike the tenured women faculty who were involved in National Science Foundation ADVANCE programs in O’Meara’s (2015) study, this study’s participants were untenured and lacked the status and job security that typically coincides with tenure. For example, Eva, an international faculty member had agentic perspective of securing funding for summer months in such a way that would not violate her visa status, but was unable to access such funding until a new dean, woman of color, came to the university and worked with her to secure an internal grant. Unfortunately, Eva’s partner still faced racism and visa stipulations that kept him out of work and unable to contribute financially to their household. Intersecting identities of being untenured, working in low-salary field, being an international faculty member of color in an overwhelmingly White university and geographic location, having two children, and being a breadwinner negatively impacted Eva’s agency and ultimately contributed to her leaving the university before earning tenure.

Kayla and Tina also did not earn tenure at their original university despite exhibiting their agency (O’Meara, 2015). In Kayla’s case, she used her agentic behavior to ask her dean for partner hire assistance and worked with the university office for spousal assistance. However, due to her initial status as a visiting professor, the behaviors did not result in the university providing

effective partner hire support. Tina employed agentic perspectives to use her summers to conduct research; but, due to her intersecting identities of her family status and lower-prestige discipline for large funding opportunities, she spent her summers teaching to provide financially for her family. Thus, women faculty breadwinners in this study enacted “alternatives to grand narratives through their framing of context and their role in them” (O’Meara, 2015, p. 332) in the context of a work environment that supports a very different type of worker and perpetuates cumulative disadvantages (Grant et al., 2000; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006).

### **Implications**

Implications for institutional practice and future research are many. For instance, women faculty breadwinners cited paid maternity leave being non-existent or unpaid through the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Other researchers (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011) found faculty may not take leave offered by institutions for fear of being seen as needing extra time to meet tenure requirements. This culture is one that can be addressed through policies that encourage not only women faculty breadwinners who have children but all faculty—such as those who must care for an aging parent or ill family member and men-identified faculty who wish to use paternity leave. Thus, a policy for encouraging women to have paid leave for childbirth or adoption could have larger implications and serve a wider audience of faculty. Therefore, beyond supporting leave through federal mandates (i.e., the FMLA), we recommend that department chairs provide, not only in theory, but also in practice, the use of sick time and vacation days so that faculty have access to paid leave when they need it most. Paid leave is of particular importance when a faculty member is a breadwinner. In this study, women faculty breadwinners did not mention such resources being available and wished institutions provided better support for their faculty as not only workers, but people with outside responsibilities. Senior administrators such as department chairs must communicate these policies to untenured women faculty who are new to a university

system and exist in a gendered context is critical. Of the resources that could have reduced participants' anxiety and increased their agency are paid maternity leave, partner job support beyond websites to browse, subsidized childcare provided by the institution, opportunities for summer research stipends especially when nine month contracts are employed, and higher starting salaries. It is encouraging that seven of the ten women faculty breadwinners in this study earned tenure and could use their position as associate professors to push for cultural shifts. However, as O'Meara's (2015) study of tenured and full women professors found, rarely did women use their agency to challenge the system; rather they used their agency to work around or within a gendered system.

With a study of ten breadwinners at research universities, there is more research needed on how women faculty experience the compounding factor of being a breadwinner on the tenure track. For example, additional studies that examine the intersection of gender and breadwinner status with race, citizenship (e.g., international faculty), sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, faith, academic discipline, among other identities would add to the literature. Last, research that critically examines the institution's "accountability for eliminating gendered practices" (O'Meara, 2015, p. 333) is needed. No matter how much agency women faculty breadwinners exhibit, if an institution does not address the gendered organization of faculty life, implications of studies such as the present one will relate to imaginary rather than real contexts.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the pressures that women faced in being the primary breadwinners for their households while on the tenure track caused them to question the cost-benefit ratio of whether the tenure track was "worth the compensation" they received. For the ten women faculty in this study, being their family's primary breadwinner functioned as a lesser researched compounding challenge on the

tenure track; and, for some women, inhibited their ability to ultimately earn tenure at their original institution. For the seven who earned tenure, the compounding role of being a breadwinner resulted in an additional source of stress throughout participants' journey toward tenure. As institutions continue to hire women—many of whom might be their household's breadwinner in addition to having to face the many challenges that women faculty already encounter according to the literature—institutions must do more than simply rely on women faculty knowing how to navigate a gendered academy. Institutions must also remember that policies and practices are acted out on real bodies and should support rather than unnecessarily impede women faculty breadwinners' success and contributions to the academy.

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